

**Press Release on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)
by the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR)**

Date 01 May 2020

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has now sadly resulted in infections and caused deaths across the globe, including in the Member States of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). We express our serious concerns about the spread of COVID-19 and its negative effects on the lives and well-being of the people of ASEAN. We appreciate the efforts of ASEAN and its individual Member States in responding to the spread of the disease, such as initiating the ASEAN Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) Network for public health emergencies, the ASEAN Risk Assessment and Risk Communication Centre, the ASEAN BioDiaspora Virtual Centre (ABVC), the ASEAN Center for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Center), and the exchange of laboratory readiness and response actions to complement the goals stated in the ASEAN Post-2015 Health Development Agenda.

We are heartened by the outcomes from the Special ASEAN Summit on COVID-19 and the Special ASEAN Plus Three Summit on COVID-19 on 14 April 2020 which emphasised on enhancing a caring and sharing ASEAN Community and highlighting the importance of taking a coherent, multi-sectoral, multi-stakeholder and whole-of-ASEAN Community approach in ensuring ASEAN's timely and effective response to the pandemic. In line with the above, we expect all ASEAN sectoral bodies and entities, as well as Member States, to integrate human rights values and the principles of non-discrimination, participation and inclusion in their responses to the crisis.

Article 29 of the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (AHRD) guarantees that every person has the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health, to basic and affordable health-care services, and to have access to medical facilities. We appreciate the measures taken so far by all Member States to ensure that this right to health is protected as a top priority. In particular, we appreciate ASEAN's proposed establishment of the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund and the encouragement for development of regional reserves of medical supplies as well as utilising relevant ASEAN reserve warehouses to support the needs of ASEAN Member States in public health emergencies. We also appreciate the encouragement by ASEAN Plus Three to maintain necessary interconnectedness in the region by facilitating to the extent possible the essential movement of people, including business travel, while ensuring the safeguarding of public health in line with efforts to combat the pandemic as well as to minimize socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19.

In the spirit of building a people-oriented and people-centred ASEAN Community, we would like to highlight that the right to health is guaranteed to all people. Measures taken to protect public health must ensure that all persons at risk or infected by

COVID-19, including women, children, the elderly, persons with disabilities, migrant workers, and vulnerable and marginalised groups, can also access essential healthcare services. We look forward to appropriate assistance and support to the nationals of ASEAN Member States affected by the pandemic in each other's country or in third countries and stress the importance of ensuring food security and strengthening the resiliency and sustainability of regional supply chains, especially for food, commodities, medicines, medical and essential supplies.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has also impacted upon a number of other rights guaranteed by the AHRD, including the rights to work, education, privacy, movement, religion, expression and peaceful assembly. While many human rights can be restricted in the pursuit of a legitimate aim, such as public health, this is always subject to the principles of necessity and proportionality.

We highlight the importance of promoting and protecting human rights while combatting COVID-19 pandemic, including economic, social, civil and political rights and rights of vulnerable groups. We underscore the right of people and community to access to information in this context and pledge to work within ASEAN and its Member States to continue to promote and protect the right to freedom of opinion and expression - the right to seek, receive and impart information - as guaranteed by Articles 8 and 23 of the AHRD. We look forward to working within ASEAN to counter misinformation and fake news by intensifying efforts to promote effective public communication, involving multiple forms of media, including timely updates of relevant government policies, public health and safety information, of clarifications on misinformation and fake news, and efforts to reduce stigmatisation and discrimination.

This is a time for ASEAN solidarity and cooperation. We resolve to collectively mitigate the impact of COVID-19 to ensure the continued enjoyment of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of the people of ASEAN. We appreciate the efforts of ASEAN to tackle COVID-19 and call for further regional cooperation to ensure greater preparedness and resilience for any future public health emergencies./.