

PANDEMIC

# COVID-19: HUMAN RIGHTS A MUST

*Measures to prevent the spread of infectious diseases are not zero-sum trade-offs and can decrease fatalities and increase suffering if human rights are not respected*  
– Professor Salim Abdool Karim

EDWIN NAIDU

UNPACKING the unintended consequences of human rights violations during South Africa's Covid-19 lockdown, a leading authority on the pandemic has called for integrating a public health response into a human rights approach because protecting human rights goes hand in hand with saving lives.

While praising the government for its swift response to the Covid-19 pandemic, KwaZulu-Natal epidemiologist, Professor Salim Abdool Karim, has criticised the use of force during the lockdown, saying, "we did some things that were not so good".

Mobilising the military resulted in several individuals' deaths, including 44-year-old Collins Khoza in Alexandra on 10 April 2020.

Abdool Karim spoke on Tuesday at the 10th anniversary annual Kader Asmal Human Rights Lecture about the unintended consequences of the lockdown: rights violations, including disruptions to HIV care in 65 primary care clinics in KwaZulu-Natal, reduction in patient attendance at health facilities in South Africa with 57% of people wary of seeking treatment during the lockdown.

"Certainly, how the government swung the pendulum, saw it mobilise 70 000 troops in lockdown level 5 yet when we had looted, they mobilised 2 500 troops, showing an imbalance in understanding how to use the military," he said.

A journal article, *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, warned that in responding to public health emergencies, governmental authorities have to tread between protecting the public's health and safeguarding their inherent human rights, including education, freedom of movement, and access to healthcare.

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Speaking to *The Sunday Independent* after the lecture, Abdool Karim said there has to be a different approach in dealing with the public health response, ensuring it is integrated with a human rights ethos.

"In HIV, that is how we do it; whether you are gay, a drug user, or a prisoner. We respect you but still implement the public health response, much more constructively."

But Abdool Karim is concerned about whether limitations of freedoms for Covid-19 are justifiable?

He said Article 25 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "... everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the

health and well-being of himself and of his family".

"For Covid-19, the right to health and life counterposed to limiting the rights to freedom of association, free speech, bodily integrity, etc.," he said.

Abdool Karim, commented during the lecture organised by the Council for the Advancement of the South African Constitution, to which the late Kader Asmal was a founding member.

Abdool Karim said the tiny virus that highlights inequities is not a viral infection; it is much more severe, especially when the World Bank talks about another 150 million people who are now extremely poor because of the pandemic. Furthermore, he said, 161 million people are hungry and are food insecure because of the pandemic.

Certainly, rights have been affected by growing poverty, more hungry people, and deepening inequalities.

Abdool Karim, the director of the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa (Caprisa), also spoke out against corruption involving personal protective equipment (PPEs) and how the epidemic created an opportunity for fraudulent activities and its negative impact on healthcare services.

He said there was a need for leaders to adopt a mentality of serving the people, not themselves, as espoused by Asmal.

"First is that the nature of how we're going to deal with pandemics, not just as Covid-19, but all pandemics. We have to find the middle ground where we carefully balance. The response, the public health response, and the human rights, and we must protect the rights as much as we can," he said.

Abdool Karim provides two conditions under which rights could be compromised via external condition externalities. So, in other words, where an individual's actions harm others. And I talked about that there's evidence to justify, it's a reasonable person, we're considered a justified cause of action. So that's the first issue that human rights and the public health responses need to go together.

"The second is that I'm hoping that people will get a sense of that, what we are doing in this pandemic is that we made a really massive blunder, at a global level. In the distribution of vaccines. We chose to go the route of distributing vaccines based on market forces and based on political favour.

"That's not to be in vaccines, not in your train to control a pandemic. I talk quite a lot about the importance of the vaccine equity because you can't control this epidemic unless everybody gets vaccines. It doesn't help if only one country has it and others don't," he said.

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