



# Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative

New Delhi, India. London, UK. Accra, Ghana

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Shri Narendra D. Modi  
Prime Minister  
New Delhi

Sub: Open letter to PM to tackle racial and other discrimination

Dear Prime Minister,

With regard to the urgent steps initiated by your Government at this critical time of preventing the spread of Covid-19, we wish to draw your attention to incidents of racism and discrimination against persons from North-East India and essential service givers like doctors, nurses, caregivers and pilots.

As you are aware, Prime Minister, many from the NER have experienced the sting of discrimination and prejudice even when they have engaged with and embraced this country and travelled widely to study, settle and earn livelihoods. Many from the region have become national icons such as Dr. Bhupen Hazarika and Mary Kom.

At a time when an invisible, deadly virus is wreaking havoc across the world killing as many as 18,000 people, your announcement of a 21-day lockdown to prevent further infection India, while raising the significance of united action, needs to be realised across boundaries of community and profession.

As you are aware, in the past few weeks, persons from the North-East states of India have become targets for racist attacks, physical and verbal. They have been beaten, dragged out of restaurants, threatened with boycott, told to leave rented accommodation and spat upon. This has been an ugly reflection of prejudice across the country with incidents reported from numerous cities, including Ahmedabad, Delhi and Kolkata at a time when India needs to stand united.

Working professionals, students and ordinary residents of this country have been called 'corona' or 'Chinese' and held responsible for "bringing the virus to India."

On Sunday, a man spat on a Manipuri woman and called her 'corona' in New Delhi. Although the Delhi Police has registered a case against the man under Section 509 (for insulting the modesty of a woman), it does not need much to realise the impact of robust police action under law towards the insult on her ethnicity, identity and appearance.

In Kolkata, four women from Nagaland and Manipur were reportedly attacked and beaten by their neighbours also on Sunday. They were told to vacate their premises while crowds shouted 'go corona go' at them.

CHRI welcomes Monday's advisory on sensitisation of law enforcement agencies by the Ministry of Home Affairs to all states.

We call upon all chief ministers and political leaders of all parties from the NE states to reach out to people from their communities who are fearful and stressed for reasons of prejudice and not just the disease. They need to liaise with the Centre and all other states to help nip this ugliness which must be met with the full force of the law, as recommended by the MP Bezbaruah committee into incidents of racial profiling and abuse in its 2015 report.

We note that others facing discrimination at the face of adversity are medical professionals and pilots, who are at the forefront of India's war against COVID-19. Doctors are reportedly being asked to vacate, and in some cases forced to leave, their homes amid fears of infection. It has also been reported that some medical professionals were met with humiliation and assault after long hours of life-saving work.

The Resident Doctor's Association of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in a letter to Home Minister Amit Shah stated that neighbours and landlords suspect that doctors are carriers of the virus.

Similar treatment was given to airline pilots who are discharging their duties selflessly, ferrying infected persons from foreign countries, and flying Indian residents to the comfort of their homes across India. Air India in a press release on Sunday raised its concerns as crew members were ostracised by their own housing societies.

While we welcome the personal appeals by some government officials to end discrimination against medical professionals, we seek proactive action, while recognising the Home Ministry's announcement of "strict action" under the Epidemic Diseases Act against harassers. We look forward to accounts of such action for these too are punishable under this Act.

In the interest of their protection and safety of the groups named above, we urge your government and others in the states to launch extensive information and social media campaigns to destroy the rumours which only create more harmful conditions at a time of the epidemic.

With regards,



Wajahat Habibullah  
Chair, CHRI,  
Former Chief Information Commissioner



Sanjoy Hazarika  
International Director, CHRI