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Promotion and protection of human rights: implementation of human rights instruments

United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture**

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report is submitted in accordance with General Assembly resolutions [36/151](#) and [74/143](#). It describes the activities undertaken by the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture since the previous report ([A/74/233](#)), including the response of the Fund to the impact of the coronavirus disease pandemic on its beneficiaries.

* [A/75/150](#).

** The present document was submitted late to the conference services without the explanation required under paragraph 8 of General Assembly resolution [53/208](#) B.



I. Introduction

A. Submission of the report

1. The present report was prepared in accordance with the arrangements approved by the General Assembly in its resolution [36/151](#), by which it established the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture. It presents the activities undertaken by the Fund from 1 January to 30 June 2020, including its response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. The present report complements the report on the activities of the Fund submitted to the Human Rights Council at its forty-third session ([A/HRC/43/25](#)).

B. Mandate of the Fund

2. The Fund receives voluntary contributions from Governments, non-governmental organizations and individuals. In accordance with its mandate and the practice established by its Board of Trustees, the Fund provides grants to established channels of assistance, including non-governmental organizations, survivors' associations, hospitals, legal clinics and public interest law firms, that submit project proposals for the provision of medical, psychological, social, legal, humanitarian, financial and other forms of direct assistance to victims of torture and members of their families.

C. Administration of the Fund and Board of Trustees

3. The Secretary-General administers the Fund through the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) with the advice of a Board of Trustees, which is composed of five members acting in their personal capacity and appointed by the Secretary-General with due regard for equitable geographical distribution and in consultation with their Governments. During the reporting period, the Board was composed of Sara Hossain (Bangladesh), Lawrence Mute (Kenya), Vivienne Nathanson (Chair, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland), Gaby Oré Aguilar (Peru) and Mikołaj Pietrzak (Poland).

II. Grants

A. Grants awarded

4. In 2020 to date, the Fund has awarded 171 annual grants (totalling \$7,303,850) to assist over 40,000 victims of torture and their families in 78 countries in all world regions. Of those, 164 were direct assistance grants (\$7,059,500) and 7 were training and seminar grants (\$244,350). The average grant size was \$42,713. The grant recommendations were adopted by the Board of Trustees at its fiftieth session, held in Geneva from 7 to 11 October 2019.

5. During the first half of 2020, the Fund awarded an additional eight emergency grants (totalling \$315,000) to provide services to approximately 1,250 victims of torture and their families in seven countries in all world regions, except the Eastern European Group. The grant recommendations were adopted by the Board of Trustees through an established intersessional procedure. At its fiftieth session, the Board had allocated \$400,000 for emergency grants in 2020.

B. Grant applications received

6. During its annual call for applications, open from 15 January to 1 March 2020, the Fund received 254 grant applications from civil society organizations for projects to be implemented in 2021. The secretariat screened the applications in March and April 2020, finding 205 of them admissible, amounting to a total of \$12,177,862 in requests for direct assistance to victims of torture. Following the evaluation of those applications by the secretariat, the Board of Trustees will make grant recommendations at its fifty-second session, to be held from 5 to 9 October 2020.

III. Financial situation of the Fund

7. The grants are funded through voluntary contributions. In 2019, 26 Member States contributed a total of \$9.2 million to the Fund (the United States of America is the Fund's largest donor).

Contributions received from 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2019

(United States dollars)

<i>Donor</i>	<i>Amount</i>	<i>Date of receipt</i>
Andorra	10 940	9 October 2019
Austria	32 822	11 October 2019
Canada (including a contribution of \$21 888 from the Government of Quebec)	44 214	21 March 2019
	21 888	1 May 2019
	9 034	26 March 2019
Chile	5 000	28 October 2019
Czechia	8 576	11 December 2019
Denmark	747 939	2 April 2019
Egypt	10 000	3 June 2019
France	79 908	26 February 2019
Germany	222 272	15 July 2019
	550 055	17 December 2019
Holy See	2 000	23 January 2019
	2 000	15 February 2019
India	50 000	20 March 2019
Ireland	97 760	12 August 2019
Italy	27 502	20 December 2019
Kuwait	10 000	7 March 2019
Liechtenstein	25 641	3 January 2019
Luxembourg	16 411	11 October 2019
Mexico	10 000	24 January 2019
Norway	330 632	18 November 2019
Pakistan	3 000	3 July 2019
Peru	1 174	10 January 2019
	1 088	5 June 2019
Portugal	22 002	24 December 2019
Saudi Arabia	75 000	23 May 2019

<i>Donor</i>	<i>Amount</i>	<i>Date of receipt</i>
Switzerland	200 200	4 December 2019
United Arab Emirates	10 000	9 April 2019
United Kingdom	35 260	12 April 2019
United States of America	6 550 000	6 January 2020 ^a
Individual donors	305	–
Total	9 212 533	

^a Part of the 2019 contribution of the United States was received in 2020.

IV. Impact of the coronavirus disease pandemic and the response of the Fund

A. Secretariat

8. The outbreak of COVID-19 beginning in early 2020 has had an impact on the administration of the Fund. The secretariat of the Fund has been able to continue to operate uninterrupted remotely. The fellowship programme, allowing two young professionals from human rights organizations to join the secretariat from 15 April 2020, has been postponed until further notice. The adjustments required to the Fund's working methods and grants management procedures to adapt to COVID-19 has generated an additional workload for the secretariat.

B. Board of Trustees

9. The fifty-first session of the Board of Trustees was scheduled to be held from 30 March to 3 April 2020 in Geneva. The sixth annual expert workshop and panel discussion, on the topic "Practitioners on the frontline: enabling civic space to assist torture survivors", was due to take place during the session, on 1 and 2 April 2020. The session was postponed as a result of travel and associated restrictions imposed following the outbreak of the pandemic.

10. The Board of Trustees nevertheless continued to exercise its advisory function through active intersessional engagement. The Board guided the Fund's strategic response to COVID-19, in order to ensure that torture victims continue to receive direct assistance and do not become even more susceptible to the effects of the virus. The Board held an intersessional call on 16 April 2020 to outline a preliminary response strategy. On 7 July 2020, the Board held its fifty-first session, at which it adopted its COVID-19 response strategy and made policy decisions originally scheduled for the postponed session, notably the adoption of the revised guidelines of the Fund for the use of applicants and grantees.

C. Impact of the pandemic on beneficiaries

11. The Fund's response strategy to COVID-19 has been guided by the impact of the pandemic on its end and direct beneficiaries, namely victims of torture and civil society organizations assisting them. In order to assess and respond to evolving needs on the ground, the Fund's secretariat has maintained regular contact with grantees. Starting in February 2020, organizations began informing the secretariat of changes required to project implementation stemming from the impact of the pandemic on

their operations. On 11 May 2020, the secretariat sent a follow-up survey to grantees to better assess the impact of COVID-19 on the practice of torture, the needs of survivors and the organizational capacity of grantees to continue project implementation.¹

12. The results of the survey confirmed that victims of torture are disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Torture survivors frequently belong to vulnerable groups, such as persons deprived of liberty and those living in refugee camps, who are more exposed to COVID-19. The devastating impact of torture on the physical and mental health of survivors is compounded by the effects of COVID-19. Social isolation, judicial insecurity, growing violence and increased poverty aggravate pre-existing vulnerabilities and associated physical and psychological symptoms. Furthermore, the global context of the pandemic is characterized by an exacerbated risk of torture and ill-treatment, in particular owing to the excessive use of force and coercion during states of emergencies.

13. In this context, torture survivors are at heightened risk of economic destitution and are struggling to cover basic needs. The survey revealed that grantees have seen a 40 per cent increase in demand for humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, the suspension of judicial procedures during the pandemic has restricted torture survivors' access to legal remedy. Organizations reported a 20 per cent decrease in the provision of legal support. These factors trigger the retraumatization of torture survivors at a time when rehabilitation services may be disrupted. For example, grantees reported that the adjournment of asylum proceedings is a source of overwhelming anxiety, exposing torture victims to relapse, after having coped with uncertainty for months, sometimes years, pending the processing of asylum applications. Grantees reported a 17 per cent increase in demands for psychological assistance.

14. The survey also revealed that although COVID-19 is testing organizations' capacity to deliver services to torture survivors at the time of greatest need, most have ensured business continuity. Grantees have adopted innovative working methods, informed by the resilience and expertise of torture survivors themselves, as well as that of doctors, psychologists, social workers, cultural mediators, community activists and others involved in project implementation. They have adopted protection measures and followed health guidance, requesting hygiene kits, medication, health promotion materials and technical equipment to guarantee remote services. The majority are prioritizing relief efforts to cover the urgent subsistence needs of torture survivors, including food packages, cash grants and even postal delivery of emergency assistance parcels. Some have established 24 hour hotlines, many have shifted to remote psychological counselling where access to technological equipment permits, and some conduct emergency visits to vulnerable individuals, such as those showing suicidal risk behaviour.

15. Nevertheless, civil society organizations are under strain in the COVID-19 context. Although most have managed to cope, they have expressed concern about the impact of the global economic crisis on future donations. Some smaller grass-roots organizations working in remote areas and associations of torture victims and families of the disappeared reported struggling with a shortage of human and financial resources. Grantees also reported that staff, including counsellors now working in isolation to care for severe trauma survivors, are exposed to secondary traumatic stress disorders, including burnout, and require additional resources to address vicarious trauma.

¹ As at 30 June 2020, the Fund had received 128 responses (out of 171 grantees).

16. Organizations already operating in a shrinking civic space have experienced additional restrictions during the pandemic, in a global context characterized by States derogating from their treaty obligations by way of emergency legislation, restricting, among other things, the right to freedom of assembly. For example, one grantee reported the inability to deliver social support, rehabilitation activities and medical consultations owing to such prohibitions. Furthermore, 15 per cent of grantees reported having faced retaliatory measures, including reprisals, for the conduct of their work, as a result of restrictive measures imposed during the pandemic (although underreporting is likely owing to fear of retaliation). The discussion about how grantees can continue to assist torture survivors in the face of restrictions on civic space, the topic of the Fund's postponed sixth annual workshop, is now more relevant than ever.

D. Grants management

17. The impact of the pandemic on the Fund's beneficiaries compelled the Board of Trustees, with the assistance of the Fund's secretariat, to seek ways to balance a flexible approach to grants management, while maintaining full accountability for project implementation. Guided by the proposal for flexible funding in the context of COVID-19 espoused by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee,² the Fund is seeking agile and timely methods to respond to the rapidly evolving needs of its beneficiaries.

18. For annual grants awarded in 2020, the Fund is allowing organizations the flexibility to reprogramme activities and the use of resources, in consultation with the Fund's secretariat and provided that the same outcome of direct support to torture victims is achieved. Modalities include budget flexibility for line items, cost eligibility on direct costs incurred owing to COVID-19 restrictions, no-cost extensions to allow operations to continue in a longer time frame and reprogramming of funds to new areas.

19. With respect to new funding applications, as a general rule, on-site evaluation visits are undertaken to the premises of all first-time and returning applicants to the Fund in order to assess their credibility and capacity. In addition, visits to ongoing grantees are conducted periodically to monitor project implementation. In 2019, 93 technical on-site visits were conducted by the Fund's Board of Trustees, secretariat and OHCHR field presences in order to reach informed decisions regarding 2020 grants. Owing to the pandemic, all visits in 2020 will be cancelled. The secretariat will find alternative ways to carry out thorough project evaluations, including through desk review, correspondence and remote contact with organizations, and reference checks with field colleagues, donors and other reliable partners. Nevertheless, the cancellation of visits may influence the recommendations for 2021 annual grants to first-time and returning applicants.

20. The Fund continued to maintain oversight, due diligence and accountability for all awarded grants in this unprecedented context. The Fund will continue to seek ways to adopt simplified due diligence and risk management processes, finding alternative ways to obtain assurances and carry out assessments, where possible through remote procedures and simplified reporting.

² Inter-Agency Standing Committee, "Proposal for a harmonized approach to funding flexibility in the context of COVID-19", IASC Results Group 5 on Humanitarian Financing (June 2020).

E. Emergency grants procedure

21. The pandemic underpins the particular relevance of the Fund's emergency grants procedure. The process allows the Fund to award grants through an expedited process to cover an extraordinary increase in the needs of torture victims for immediate services as a direct result of a sudden change in circumstances. Of the eight emergency grants awarded to date in 2020, three included services required by torture survivors facing the disproportionate consequences of the pandemic.

22. Of the grantees surveyed by the Fund, 46 per cent (58 out of 128 organizations) indicated a need for additional emergency funding to care for torture survivors most exposed to the effects of the pandemic, amounting to nearly \$1 million in additional funding requests. The Board will consider inviting these organizations to submit an emergency application under a special call for COVID-19 emergency grants. The call would target services to torture survivors most exposed to COVID-19 and its consequences, as well as organizations struggling to operate owing to pandemic-related restrictions on civil liberties. Any savings generated by the Fund as a result of the pandemic could be reallocated for this purpose.

V. Strategic partnerships

23. The secretariat maintained contact with the co-chairs of the Group of Friends of the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture, Denmark and Georgia, to provide regular updates about ongoing work. The Group was established in March 2019 to champion the right to redress, including rehabilitation, of torture victims and to raise the visibility of and increase support for the Fund.³ Two activities scheduled with the Group during the fifty-first session of the Board were postponed owing to the pandemic: a briefing by Board members to the Group's member States about the Fund's activities and a regional event hosted by the Permanent Representative of Chile to promote the Fund's work in Latin America, where the Fund awarded 28 annual grants in 2020.

24. With a view to increasing outreach in Africa, the Fund drafted an article for a newsletter published by the Committee for the Prevention of Torture in Africa. The article introduced the work and functions of the Fund and included relevant figures about the 26 annual grants awarded to organizations in Africa in 2020. The article also indicated how to apply for funds.

VI. International Day in Support of Victims of Torture

25. On 26 June 2020, a joint statement⁴ was issued by the four anti-torture mechanisms of the United Nations⁵ on the occasion of the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture. The statement focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

³ The founding members of the Group of Friends are Argentina, Austria, Chile, Czechia, Denmark, Georgia, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Mexico, Norway, Peru, Switzerland and the United States.

⁴ Available at www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/int-day-torture.aspx.

⁵ The Committee against Torture, the Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and the Board of Trustees of the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture.

26. The anti-torture mechanisms warned that the pandemic exacerbates the risk of torture and ill-treatment worldwide. They reiterated the crucial importance of the absolute and non-derogable prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. They stressed the particular vulnerability of persons deprived of liberty, calling on States to explore alternatives to pretrial detention, incarceration, immigration detention and closed refugee camps. They also called on States to refrain from the abuse of emergency powers under the guise of protecting health and to guarantee access to all places of detention, including by civil society organizations.

27. Underlining the importance of redress and rehabilitation, the Chair of the Fund's Board of Trustees, Ms. Nathanson, cautioned that torture survivors are at increased risk of further traumatization from the pandemic. She said that torture victims are burdened with physical, social, economic and mental health problems. They may also lack the living conditions that allow them to guard against the spread of the virus. She commended the outstanding efforts undertaken by civil society organizations to continue to provide essential services to torture survivors, including during states of emergency and curfews, even when they faced acts of intimidation or obstruction by the authorities.

28. Also on 26 June 2020, the anti-torture mechanisms convened a live web-based event entitled "Combating torture and ill-treatment in the COVID-19 context: testimonies from the ground", which was hosted by the Association for the Prevention of Torture.

29. The event focused on the challenges of combating torture during the pandemic in the context of deprivation of liberty and of emergency legislation. During their presentations, experts from the four anti-torture mechanisms⁶ recalled applicable international norms and fundamental safeguards during states of emergency, and the obligation of States to ensure that measures do not unduly hamper civil society operations.

30. Representatives of organizations receiving support from the Fund in Brazil, Jordan, the Philippines and South Africa⁷ shared testimonies of restrictions and other practical challenges they are confronting while assisting torture victims, including detainees, during the pandemic.

VII. How to make a contribution to the Fund

31. Governments, non-governmental organizations and other private or public entities can contribute to the Fund. For more information about the Fund and how to contribute, donors are requested to contact:

Secretariat of the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
United Nations, CH 1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland
Email: unvft@ohchr.org; phone: +41 22 917 9376

32. Donations can also be made online at donatenow.ohchr.org/torture.aspx.

⁶ Malcolm Evans (Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment), Nils Melzer (Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment), Jens Modvig (Committee against Torture) and Vivienne Nathanson (Board of Trustees of the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture).

⁷ Yusra Al-Kailani, Center for Victims of Torture (Jordan), Clare Ballard, Lawyers for Human Rights (South Africa), Mara Carneiro, Centro de Defesa de Criança e do Adolescente do Ceara (Brazil) and Nymia Simbulan, Medical Action Group (Philippines).

33. Information on the Fund can be found at www.ohchr.org/torturefund.

VIII. Conclusions and recommendations

34. **The Fund continues to play an indispensable supporting role to scores of organizations that provide specialized assistance to victims of torture, through the impartial delivery of direct assistance, upholding a survivor-focused approach.**

35. **The unprecedented challenge generated by the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the need for the Fund to respond swiftly to new and emergency situations, wherever they occur, in a creative and flexible manner. In the current circumstances, the Fund will continue to place a particular emphasis on sustaining partnerships with both grass-roots initiatives and rehabilitation centres, with a view to assessing needs and filling assistance gaps for the most vulnerable victims.**

36. **The pandemic has disproportionately affected torture victims, who are often exposed to intersectional vulnerabilities and discrimination, in particular refugees, asylum seekers, persons deprived of liberty, persons with disabilities and those belonging to economically marginalized groups. Torture victims can be more exposed to the virus itself, as well as to its economic impact. They risk further deterioration of their fragile physical and mental health, and further violence and abuse.**

37. **In this context, the role of the Fund is more relevant than ever. To respond to the impact of the global crisis on those who need its support, the Fund is balancing flexibility with accountability, and is deploying its emergency grants procedure. The Fund will also continue to support organizations through its regular grants.**

38. **In 2019, the Fund reached a record income of \$9.2 million from 26 Member States. The Fund appeals to its donors and friends for additional support commensurate with the exceptional needs described. The Fund will uphold its reputation for oversight, due diligence and accountability.**

39. **Now more than ever, States must guarantee effective and accessible avenues for redress, including rehabilitation programmes for torture victims burdened by paralysed judicial systems and re-traumatization in the context of the global pandemic.**