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COVID-19 will not be stopped without providing safe water to people living in vulnerability – UN experts

GENEVA (23 March 2020) – As washing hands with soap and clean water is vital in the fight against COVID-19, governments worldwide must provide continuous access to sufficient water to their populations living in the most vulnerable conditions, UN experts* said.

“The global struggle against the pandemic has little chance to succeed if personal hygiene, the main measure to prevent contagion, is unavailable to the 2.2 billion persons who have no access to safe water services,” the experts said.

“We call on governments to immediately prohibit water cuts to those who cannot pay water bills. It is also essential that they provide water free of cost for the duration of the crisis to people in poverty and those affected by the upcoming economic hardship. Public and private service providers must be enforced to comply with these fundamental measures.

“For the most privileged, washing hands with soap and clean water - the main defence against the virus - is a simple gesture. But for some groups around the world it is a luxury they cannot afford.”

The UN experts welcomed the measures announced by some governments to mitigate the impact of the loss of jobs likely to result from the pandemic and called for policies to ensure the continuous access to water and sanitation.

“People living in informal settlements, those who are homeless, rural populations, women, children, older persons, people with disabilities, migrants, refugees and all other groups vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic need to have continuous access to sufficient and affordable water. Only this will allow them to comply with the recommendations of health institutions to keep strict hygiene measures,” the UN experts said.

They expressed concerns that economically vulnerable people will become victims of a vicious cycle. “Limited access to water makes them more likely to get infected. Infection leads to illness and isolation measures, making it difficult

for people without social security to continue earning a living. Their vulnerability increases, which results in even more limited access to water. Governments need to implement measures to break this cycle.

"Throughout our mandates, we keep insisting on the need to ensure that 'no one is left behind.' Governments must pay special attention to marginalised groups who are rarely at the centre of public policies related to water and sanitation. In relation to COVID-19, this message is even more critical," they said.

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** **The UN experts:** the Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking [water and sanitation](#), Mr Léo Heller; the Independent expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable [international order](#), Mr Livingstone Sewanyana; the Special Rapporteur on the rights of [persons with disabilities](#), Ms Catalina Devandas-Aguilar; the Special Rapporteur on the [right to development](#), Mr Saad Alfarargi; the Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable [environment](#), David R. Boyd; the Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental [health](#), Mr Dainius Puras; the Special Rapporteur on [adequate housing](#) as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living; Ms Leilani Farha; the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of [migrants](#), Mr Felipe González Morales; the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by [older persons](#), Ms Rosa Kornfeld-Matte; and the the Independent Expert on human rights and [international solidarity](#), Mr Mr. Obiora C. Okafor; and the Independent Expert on the effects of [foreign debt](#) and other related international financial obligations of States on the full enjoyment of all human rights, particularly economic, social and cultural rights, Mr Juan Pablo Bohoslavsky.*

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