



Children & COVID-19 PARLIAMMENTARY RESPONSE

SPECIAL GROUP ON CHILD RIGHTS

**THE NATIONAL PARLIAMMENTARY TASK FORCE ON
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS**



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Message

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National Parliamentary Task Force on SDGs



“The novel COVID-19 Virus has caused countless deaths which has created a panic amongst the world’s population. Over 200 countries are desperately battling with this pandemic. Governments have issued directives around the globe and lock downs have been imposed. A consequence of the lock down is that people are confined to the four walls of their homes; there is discussion about the virus and its deadly impact making environments at home stressful. Such a stressful environment can cause a significant psychological impact on children as well as adults.

The effects of COVID-19 are borne by the elder population with pre-existing medical conditions where as the children are impacted indirectly. It is extremely important to keep in mind that young children, including children with disabilities are highly affected by the lockdown, social distancing and anxiety of their parents or caregivers. They are subject to psychological aggression or physical abuse in a hostile home environment.

In some cases reduced family protection of children, may also result in increase in child sexual exploitation. We have to keep our children including children with disabilities safe and healthy, keep them learning, and protect them from violence and exploitation and scale up social protection measures for vulnerable families.

The closure of educational institutions, which are not just places for learning but also social interaction – is bound to have a negative impact on children. As a consequences of school closures, the most likely to get impacted are girl students who, if kept out of school for a longer period of time, the likely hood of their coming back may be bleak, once classes in educational institutions resume.

The children at the bottom of the pyramid will bear the brunt of the socio economic impact of COVID 19. Many bread earners in their family may lose jobs because of the economic crunch.

In such a situation health systems in less developed countries are over whelmed and disruptions in immunization services is feared. There is a threat of outbreaks of diseases such as cholera, measles and polio for which there already exists a vaccine. Many nutrition programs are likely to be disrupted or suspended in such a chronic situation.



Parliamentarians can play an important role in this regard by paying due diligence to policy matters and by ensuring they fulfill their roles. They can ensure that the rights of children are protected in their constituencies. Ensure children are immunized on time, monitor the departments relevant to child issues like health & child protection whether they are working effectively etc. Create awareness in the community on precautionary measures to check the spread of the contagious disease and facilitate in providing necessary structures in this regard like child friendly washing stations, sanitizers etc.

Equally important is to adopt a decentralized approach to deliver at district and sub-district level. To ensure participatory democratic governance, local governments can play a key role to ensure effective relief efforts by mobilizing and empowering citizens. “



National Parliamentary Task Force on SDGs

Pakistan has ratified CRC and is also signatory to 'The Agenda 2030: Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030)'. Pakistan is the first country that established Parliamentary Task Force on SDGs. ***Child Rights is a cross cutting theme of SDGs.*** Targets of a number of SDGs relate to child rights. Parliament of Pakistan has demonstrated its support and commitment to SDGs by establishing National Parliamentary Task Force on SDGs.

Special Group on Child Rights of the Parliamentary Task Force on SDGs

Recognizing the importance of rights of children and in the context of 30th Anniversary of CRC, Parliamentary Task Force on SDGs constituted a Special Committee on Child Rights, with the support of UNICEF, which aims to:

- To monitor the implementation of child rights related laws
- To review progress of rights envisaged in CRC,
- To identify gaps, recommend remedial actions including new legislation, and increased financing for children
- To serve as a platform for stakeholders on child rights

Composition of the Special Group:

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2. Ms. Kishwar Zehra MNA
3. Ms. Rubina Irfan MNA
4. Ms. Nafeesa Inayatullah Khan Khattak MNA
5. Ms. Javaria Zafar Aheer MNA
6. Ms. Shahndana Gulzar Khan MNA
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9. Dr. Nafisa Shah MNA
10. Mr. Kheal Das Kohistani, MNA

CHILD RIGHTS RELATED SDGS





BACKGROUND

Realizing the catalytic role of children and their proper nurturing for the national development, National Parliamentary Task Force on SDGs constituted a separate Sub Committee on Child Rights CRC notified by the National Assembly on 30th May 2019. One of the mandates of the committee was to serve as a platform for coordination of efforts by various stakeholders for achievement of targets of SDGs related to welfare and development of children.

The novel corona virus or COVID -19 is playing havoc across the globe, every day resulting in more victims and more deaths. The epidemic exploded into a pandemic as declared by World Health Organization on March 11, 2020. To contain the spread of the virus the governments around the world have issued directives to their citizens to stay in door in order to contain the impact of virus. This way less people will get in touch with the virus. Be it print, electronic or social media news about COVID-19 virus is everywhere creating panic and stress among families and not realizing how terrifying it could be for children. With their schools closed & with social distancing and locked down children are vulnerable to all kind of abuses. They also have limited access to basic services. The family could reduce the anxiety in children by teaching them positive preventive measures, talking with them about their fears, and giving them a sense of some control over their risk of infection but to ensure that the children are not abused the concerned departments will have to be vigilant.

1. MONITORING:

Parliamentarians have a key role to play during the pandemic in serving as an essential bridge between the Executive and the people they represent. Keeping the important role of Parliament and Parliamentarians in view, Honorable Speaker of the National Assembly has constituted a Parliamentary Committee on Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) under his Chairmanship comprising leaders of the Parliamentary Parties in the National Assembly and the Senate of Pakistan (or their nominees).

The Committee will periodically review, monitor and oversee implementation of the National Action Plan on COVID-19 with a view to ensure expeditious implementation and to present periodical reports of the committee to both Houses of the Majlis-e-Shoora (Parliament). It is important that children are also included in the agenda as the needs and requirements of children are different from adults.

1.1 National Command & Operation Center

The government of Pakistan has set up National Command & Operation Center for Corona virus with centralized mechanism for regular sharing of information, latest updates, figures and directions on the disease. The setting up of this central authority has helped in monitoring the spread of the virus. Steps for containment are taken accordingly. What is now required is a



segregated data so that we know how many children are affected and SOPs should be drafted for documenting and referring children's cases that may need follow-up.

Parliamentarians can play a critical role in monitoring that lockdown is strictly in place in their respective constituencies and precautionary Standard Operating Procedures (SOPS) are followed.

2. DECENTRALIZING TO DELIVER AT CONSTITUENCY LEVEL:

While the COVID-19 pandemic has affected everyone, economically deprived and poor families are the most vulnerable in this situation. Comprehensive coordination is necessary to ensure an effective solution.

In order to reduce the adverse effects of the ongoing crisis, decentralized coordination amongst all stakeholders must be promoted. This implies that relief efforts by federal and provincial government must be complimented by the district departments to facilitate provision of basic services to vulnerable groups including children with disabilities, refugees and migrant groups.

Action Plan:

Parliamentarians can play a key role in ensuring that particular practical steps are taken including:

- Ensure Ehsaas Emergency Cash Program is fairly distributed amongst the needy in their respective constituencies and the ration provided is nutritionally sufficient. It must also be ensured that families of children with disabilities are accorded priority.
- It must also be seen that children with disabilities are granted testing priority. Their education is ensured and the right to medical care
- Cross-sector coordination with local philanthropists, local government representatives, civil society organizations specifically working on children issues, and other government bodies can lead to effective resource utility.
- Efficient management of volunteers will allow better accessibility for Government relief efforts.
- Establishment of safe, child-friendly complaints & feedback mechanisms in health care facilities. That children are kept and treated separately and are provided a safe and friendly environment.
- Strengthen capacity on clinical management of rape (CMR) and ensure minimum CMR supplies are available in key facilities to appropriately respond to child abuse cases. As in the wake of pandemic children are more prone to such mishaps.

We, all together, must ensure children are included in all COVID -19 response and recovery decisions so that no child is left behind.

Inter-Agency Working Group on Violence Against Children- Agenda for Action)



- Measures for safe & regular communication between children and parents/caregivers who are temporarily separated because of quarantine should be taken.
- Coordination with relevant departments to ensure child-friendly hand-washing stations are available at health facilities, schools, child care centers or other places likely to be visited by children.
- Local government should ensure children & families in quarantine; self-isolation or health facilities have access to ample nutritional support. Also Nutritional support to expecting mothers and children under five should also be monitored.
- Should build on the strengths and positive coping mechanisms of communities, families, caregivers & children in the constituency.
- Coordinate with relevant authorities in developing an inter-agency plan to strengthen the care of vulnerable children including the children with disabilities, refugees, migrant and trans children and put in place measures to prevent child-family separation.
- There is need to operationalize, strengthen and monitor child protection and welfare units so that children have a safe space to live incase if their caregiver gets infected.
- National Helpline for Children be initiated and capacity of gender based violence services be enhanced to respond to survivors and witnesses of violence.
- The decision on activities that concern children should be guided by the principle of best interest of child as given in the convention on the Rights of child, as well as Pakistan's Human Rights obligations - national, regional and international.
- Ensure that gender disaggregated data about increased or reduced violence against children is maintained and which can be used in informed decision making.

3. OUTREACH & AWARENESS:

Since Corona Virus is a novel disease the disadvantaged families who have little or no access to electronic media have little knowledge about the precautions they should take in order to prevent it from affecting them. What they require is sensitization on the disease and what preventive measures should be adopted.

Action Plan:

- There is a need for factual, easy to understand information to be circulated about the potential seriousness of the disease and its consequences. The material should have concrete instructions on how to avoid infections and the spread of the disease for the families, which means that parents/caregivers and children must be aware of the disease and its symptoms in order to prevent spread. This information should also be prepared for special children using sign language. Trans children should also be a part of this awareness campaign.
- The information materials need to be produced like the one shared by UNICEF and WHO to apprise parents & children of the safety measures. The material for children and non-literate segments should be in child friendly versions like a cartoon strip or some illustrations so that it is readily understood.



- Multiple mediums may be used in order to create awareness such as theatre, drama, advertisements, publications, and messages on pan flex & awareness campaigns on print and electronic media. Parliamentarians in their constituencies can supervise such activities.
- Explanatory Videos and Audios on the subject in local languages will help in the effective dissemination of information about COVID-19. Talks from relevant experts may also be included.
- Awareness raising activities can be undertaken to instill in children healthy habits like frequent washing of hands or cough or sneeze into their elbow or a tissue etc. Ulema, political leaders, youth, teachers, students and volunteer can also play an important role in educating masses on prevention aspects.
- Public education & awareness campaigns are required on violence against children and its prevention, parenting tips to prevent child maltreatment, ways to identify signs of potential violence at home, how to access services and how a neighbor or friend can assist someone experiencing abuse.
- Promote awareness in children of their rights and ability to claim rights. They can be guided on their role as actors of positive change and peer-to peer resources. A questionnaire can be designed in this regard which can be disseminated Nationally. The data collected from the survey/questionnaire can be analyzed and used to develop informed prevention and response interventions & policies etc based on international experience.
- Launch series of webinars with experts and Civil Society Organizations on child rights, child protection. Develop linkages with national, regional and international organizations & networks exclusively working on Child Rights like *Child Rights Forum Asia* (working on child rights & human rights) & *Special Representative of the Secretary General on –Violence Against Children (SRSG – VAC)* to know how they are coping with issues of children in such a situation and to share Pakistan's efforts on this platform.
- Virtual consultations with the organizations working with children need to be organized involving child participatory activities at online and off line spaces
- Create specific page on COVID -19 & rights of children on SDGs website collecting child participation work of the organizations with objective to document and create a digital repository of the efforts that can be updated regularly and communicated widely to the public.

4. INCLUSIVITY SDGS - AGENDA OF LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND

Government in the wake of spread of Corona virus has taken a number of steps. The important one being, equipping doctors and health workers with testing kits, protective gears and masks across Pakistan as they are on the frontline with the COVID-19 patients.

Parliamentarians should ensure that children including children with disabilities, migrant and refugees children are properly looked after when they arrive in the quarantine center. They are provided opportunity to talk to their adults or care givers on telephone frequently.



The second important thing is provision of emergency cash to the people living at the bottom of pyramid and suffering the most because of the lock down.

4.1 Women & Children

a. Health

A child is at heightened risk of abuse, neglect, violence, exploitation, psychological distress and negative impact on its development during any outbreak.

The increased psychosocial distress among caregivers and community members may result in increase in child abuse and domestic violence. There are reduced social supports during the crises situation. It is not only the children who

are at risk during the COVID-19 outbreak but also women and girls are also vulnerable in this situation. They are at increasing risk of gender-based violence as quarantine and social distancing may force many to remain in hostile environments at home.

During the pandemic there is lack of access to reproductive and sexual healthcare centers as the major chunk of the health set-up is busy in fighting the pandemic. Health system is the worst to suffer during COVID-19 crisis. Over 117 million children in 37 countries may miss out receiving lifesaving measles vaccine. Measles immunization campaigns in 24 countries have been delayed. This means a threat of outbreak of diseases for which already exists a vaccine.

Over 117 million children in 37 countries may miss out receiving lifesaving measles vaccine

‘What began as a health crises risks evolving into a broader child-rights crisis’- UN Secretary General

- Measles immunization campaigns in 24 countries have already been delayed. This means threat of outbreak of diseases for which there already exists a vaccine.

already there

b. Protection

According to UN Inter-Agency Working Group on Violence against Children during the COVID-19 crises there is emerging evidence that violence against children is increasing from domestic violence and abuse at home to use of excessive use of force by law enforcement agencies to enforce lock down decision of the government against street children. In the words of UN Secretary general: ‘what began as a health crises risks evolving into a broader child-rights crisis’.

With girls out of school they would be at greater risk of early marriages. Parliamentarians can help safeguard the rights of the most vulnerable in their constituencies in such a situation by keeping in touch with relevant departments and ensuring the girls come back to school when the situation improves



Children of women in violent situations are at greater risk of violence and sexual exploitation. Stringent measures need to be taken to reduce cases of violence against children such as setting up a children's helpline number in each province in the present COVID-19 scenario. This help line should be advertised widely so that maximum number of children knows about it.

The burden of care usually falls on women, not just for children in the face of school closures, but also for extended family members. As family members fall ill, women are more likely to provide care for them (as evident in Ebola outbreak in Liberia and AIDS cases in Uganda), putting themselves at higher risk of exposure as well as sacrificing their time.

Women are also more likely to be burdened with household tasks, which increase with more people staying at home during quarantine. This also leads to poor care of children especially where the families are large as in the case of Pakistan where the average household size is 6.7 persons. This puts children at higher health risks in the current pandemic and poor educational outcomes. This could be the case in post COVID-19 and needs to be addressed systematically by developing a framework to address child protection during and after this pandemic with campaigns specifically targeting child protection.

Therefore, it becomes imperative to empower women so that they not only protect themselves but also their children in post COVID-19 period. This pandemic may lead to a situation of increasing abuse and economic constraints making women take added pressure to earn. While women may be forced to work, this could make children more vulnerable in the absence of a proper childcare system. Post COVID-19 would require strengthening of formal and informal institutions for childcare that are safe, friendly and regularly monitored by government authorities.

Protection of children and their rights in disadvantaged households, especially in rural areas would need surveillance mechanisms to be established. Child registration across the board would be needed, essentially to assess the services needed to protect and provide basic services to vulnerable mothers and children. *Ehsaas* Programme could take the lead in this regard and their data could be used.

c. Education

Education and learning experiences for millions of children around the world have changed. Governments all around the world have closed educational institutions in an attempt to control the global pandemic and to keep children safe from its effects. According to UNICEF school closures have disrupted the education of 1.57 billion students- 91 percent world - wide. Entire generation could suffer damage to their learning and potential. The closure of schools carries a high social and economic cost. The impact is particularly severe for disadvantaged boys and girls and their families including

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migrant, refugees and children with disabilities.

Pakistan cannot afford to have children be out of school for prolonged period of time. Although majority of the schools and Universities in the private sector switched to the on line learning yet a lot needs to be done in the area of e-learning.

Schools provide essential learning and due to their closure children and youth are deprived of opportunities for learning and social interaction important for their holistic development. Many parents struggle to facilitate the learning of their children at home. This becomes a problem especially when parents have limited education or resources at hand. So there is a need for solutions for education, which allows temporary home schooling situations.

In Pakistan 22.6 million children are out of school and 25% of its population lives below poverty

Public sector on the other hand is not ready for this transition. It is important to remember that a large majority of the population in Pakistan will not be able to shift to the new system of virtual learning due to the unavailability of resources and online systems at homes specially the children of marginalized community.

The changes in circumstances because of the pandemic have indeed prompted new examples of educational innovation. In a country like Pakistan where 22.6 million children are out of school and 25% of its population living below poverty line it is important to engage disadvantaged children in stress reduction activities that are within their means.

Pakistan allocates 2.4% of the GDP on education and 13.8% of the federal budget

It is essential to recognize that even after COVID-19, education systems cannot go back to usual. Education systems must build features around resilience and cater to the implications of the current outbreak. Education systems need to be more adequately prepared in order to avoid such disruption in the future. Future strategies need to be devised to ensure teaching hours are not lost due to the impact of the pandemic.

There is a need to ensure family support services to meet demands for distance and online learning as well as solutions to low or no tech learning. This opportunity should be taken to invest in preparing for the next emergency by curriculum enhancement and focusing on how build upon existing Education sectors.

d. Education of Children with Disabilities

Sheldon Shaeffer Chair, Asia-Pacific Regional Network of Early Childhood (ARNEC) Board of Directors in his article: The world post-COVID might be the world pre-Incheon—or even pre-Dakar,” says that the post COVID period for children with delays & disabilities who had extra support & targeted services in ECD programs and primary schools, will not find them at home



and so will fall further behind their ‘abled’ peers. According to him we have to ensure that they not only resume their education but also can make up for the developmental and educational disruption that they have suffered and to address the gaps that have increased in relation to their advantaged and “included” peers; that is: extra support to children with delays and disabilities upon re-entering schools to help ensure that they quickly return to – and then go beyond – their developmental and educational attainments pre-COVID-19 in order to negate the gap between them and their abled peers

4.2 Child-Friendly Budgeting

Pakistan’s budgetary system does not recognize children as a separate ‘unit of allocation’. Therefore, children are neither a ‘sector of development’ nor a ‘unit of expenditure’ in the existing public financial management system.

Instead, child-specific investments are scattered under sectoral programs such as primary education, tertiary health care and social welfare. Accordingly, data availability is limited, both for assessing public financing and expenditure specific to children, as well as for tracking progress on the impact of multiple interventions targeting children.

Allocations are made through ad hoc policies, based on the priorities of the ruling Government¹. We need to have well-nourished children for Pakistan’s future prosperity and the country’s ability to achieve the SDGs.

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Reduction in the development expenditure in 2018, has affected child specific programs. As far as, Public Sector Development Programs (PSDP) are concerned, 49% decline has been seen in 2018 in the share of health-specific PSDP and from July 2018 to March 2019 health expenditure at the federal and provincial level experienced a 10% decline as compared to the same period last fiscal year.

Pakistan: 152/189 in Human Development Index

PSDP share of the SDG's have reduced by 83% it shows that child rights are further compromised as SDG's cover many indicators related to child rights such as health, nutrition, gender equality, education and environment. In terms of investment in the educational sector, Pakistan allocates 2.4% of the GDP on education and 13.8% of the federal budget. Furthermore,

¹ Situation Analysis of Children in Pakistan - 2017



Pakistan's spending on the social protection is close to 0.3% of the GDP only. There is a dire need to ensure an inclusive, coherent, and coordinated child-friendly budget at federal and provincial levels. It is important to understand public financial management is imperative as it forms an integral element in children's national development.

Budgeting, as key component of the public financial management has been termed as the genesis of functional public administration and service delivery. While decentralized budgeting is crucial for better service delivery on poverty reduction, health, education, child safety & protection especially in present and post Covid-19 situation. International financial Institutions will have to step up to this challenge as well and international commitments to enhance budgetary allocations specifically for children would be needed in current Covid-19 scenario.

Pakistan's spending on the social protection is close to 0.3% of the GDP only.

4.3 Juvenile Prisoners and Children in Jails

Pakistan has one of the largest prison populations in the world, totaling over 77,275 prisoners.² This includes juveniles, mentally ill, physically disabled and elderly prisoners. There is an excess of prisoners throughout regions in Pakistan, occupancy of central and district jails exceed prison capacity. The levels of over population will only lead to a rapid spread of the Pandemic inside in the jails.

According to the fourth implementation report by the Federal Ombudsman Secretariat in 2016, there are a total of 1,204 female prisoners in Pakistan. According to the report by the Commission constituted by Islamabad High Court, there are 83 mothers with children in various jails of Punjab and 90 children. In KPK, there are 37 mothers with 50 children. Women with children represent vulnerable sections of Pakistan's prison population who should be considered for immediate release in the wake of COVID-19.³

Pakistan has one of the largest prison populations in the world, totaling over 77,275 prisoners.¹

Province	Juvenile Prisoners	Total Prisoners
Punjab	509	24,545
KPK	314	6,753
Sindh	143	11,354
Balochistan	44	1200

² Federal Ombudsman Secretariat, Fourth Implementation Report in Suo Moto Case No. 01 of 2006

³ 2020_04_20_PUB Policy Recommendations: Safeguards for Pakistani Prisoners during COVID- 19 – JPP



There are occasions where children, instead of being sent to juvenile jails are sent to district and central jails, which is in violation of our commitments under the Convention on the Rights of the Children, which mandates the separation of juvenile and adult offenders. Protecting children in central and district jails becomes an issue and there are several complaints of torture and exploitation of these children by jail staff/police officials.

After the conviction and detention of mothers with minors, they are often left with no choice but to take their children with them as there may not be any other caretakers or guardians.

4.4 Impact of Corona on Children in Jails

The corona virus is transmitted through human-to-human contact and there is a high risk of frequent transmission via droplets carried through sneezing or coughing. There is an increased risk for an outbreak in prisons due to the vulnerability of the prison population. Prisons are overcrowded and present a high risk in a situation of outbreaks and communicable diseases. People in detention facilities and their numbers need to be carefully reduced to avoid an explosive spread of the virus in such closed and overcrowded settings. There is a need to release juveniles from jails and keep in Child Protection Units.

Lowering the number of people in detention facilities is a key way to lower the risk of health consequences arising for people in prison including prison staff in such emergency situations. Currently 92 Pakistan prisoners have tested positive for COVID- 19.⁴

City	Cases Tested Positive
Lahore	59
Sialkot	14
Gujranwala	7
DG Khan	9
Bhakkar	2
Quetta	1

Not releasing children accused or convicted of crimes in times of global health emergencies like COVID-19 and keeping them in jails with adults or with potentially other infected prisoners, puts the life and well-being of those juveniles at risk and therefore constitutes a direct violation of Pakistan's international human rights and constitutional obligations.

- i. The Federal and Provincial Governments (Ministry of Interior and Home Departments, as the case may be) should consider:
 - Immediately releasing all under trial juveniles on personal surety;

⁴ <https://www.jpp.org.pk/>



- Releasing all juvenile convicts not convicted for heinous offences on personal surety
- Releasing those juvenile convicts from jails convicted for heinous offences and giving them under the custody of a suitable person (as defined under JJSA, 2018).
 - Where possible, the Provincial Governments may commute the punishment under Section 54 and 55 of the Pakistan Penal Code, 1860; and/ or
 - Request the President of Pakistan under Article 45 of the Constitution of Islamic Republic of Pakistan to grant pardon, reprieve and respite, and to remit, suspend or commute any sentence passed by any court, tribunal or other authority.
- ii. Juveniles released from jails should immediately be tested and treated for COVID-19 as per SOPs issued by WHO and Ministry of National Health Services.
- iii. There should be coordination with social welfare departments, health departments, bar associations and local CSOs specialized in child protection and child justice should be ensured for technical support and facilitation services whenever required.⁵

Legal Tools

1. Article 25 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan authorizes the state to make special provisions for the protection of women and children. The best interests of the mother and the child during detention need to be catered to by making special provisions for their protection during incarceration.
2. Section 401 of the CrPC grants the Federal and Provincial Governments to suspend sentence or remit part of whole of any punishment at any time without any conditions. However it is not exercised as frequently as it should be and it can be a particularly useful tool for the protection of mothers with infants or minors, especially breastfeeding mothers.

⁵ 2020_04_20_PUB Policy Recommendations: Safeguards for Pakistani Prisoners during COVID- 19 – JPP