

Press Release

The Human Rights Forum (HRF) strongly urges the governments of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana to take over all private hospitals and nursing homes so as to meet the challenge posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. They should be acquired along with all human resources, available medical resources and must be run by the government. Several State governments have already moved in this direction. In fact, the government of India must follow the example of Spain and nationalize all private hospitals across the country for effective mitigation of the pandemic.

Everyone seems to be holding their breath hoping that the virus would not break out in epidemic form, in which unfortunate case, catastrophe awaits. Fortunately, so far the COVID-19 has been relatively merciful in the country. One dreads to imagine what would happen in the event of a big outbreak. Will our public health system, as it exists now, be able to meet the contingency? We feel it cannot cope and will be completely overwhelmed if there is a huge breakout. Which is why all private health providers and their facilities should be placed into governmental control in order to enhance our capacity to deal with this crisis. Such a step would help us be better prepared to effectively fight the Coronavirus.

Presently, the state of the nation's health infrastructure is pitiful. It is widely acknowledged that our capacity to respond to a public health emergency like COVID-19 is highly inadequate. Testing facilities are simply not enough and there is a pressing need to expand them massively at the earliest. Evidently, these facilities as well as protective gear for doctors and para medics as well as sanitary staff are miserably low. What we need now more than ever is a robust system. The health infrastructure, as it exists today, particularly in smaller towns, villages and the Fifth Schedule areas is abysmally inadequate. It would be stating the obvious when we say India has a system that works for the rich instead of a public health system for all that can readily anticipate and control new pathogens through effective and widespread testing, contact tracing and quarantine. What we need clearly at the moment is to massively strengthen our health system and improve access to health care particularly for the poor and vulnerable.

According to reports, even at a trying time like this, some private hospitals are up to the odious practice of profit-at-any-cost and are even offering treatment packages!

Also, there has not been much headway in the matter of releasing undertrials and convicted prisoners of certain categories on emergency parole or furlough so as to reduce overcrowding and prevent spread of the virus. It has been a week since the Supreme Court stated that overcrowding in prisons was a matter of grave concern particularly in the context of COVID-19. It had directed all States and Union Territories to constitute high-level committees to consider releasing prisoners and undertrials on parole or interim bail for offences entailing upto a 7-year jail term in order to decongest prisons.

While several States have moved in this direction, we are yet unclear whether requisite guidelines have been framed to actualize this laudable directive in AP and Telangana. Across AP, there are totally about 7000 persons incarcerated with the number of inmates in just the four central prisons being about 5000. In Telangana, the total number is about 6000. Precious time has already been lost.

Old habits, it is said, die hard. The police are doing a difficult job in these trying times but a health emergency does not mean they have the license to abuse their powers and beat, abuse and humiliate people. Reports continue to come in of police overstepping their brief and indulging in wanton, open violence, even on those associated with essential services.

In these truly terrifying times, while we are collectively vulnerable, it is the homeless, migrant workers, destitute and daily wagers who are among those most at risk. The government, as daily reports indicate, is not doing enough to address their plight. This 21-day lockdown, much as it is required, was gone into without sufficient planning on how the poor will survive. The underprivileged and resourceless ought to have been the focus of governmental strategy. Cruelly, as events of the past week have shown, the government seems to be offering them up as the first victims of this crisis.

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