COVID-19: HUMAN RIGHTS A MUST

Measures to prevent the spread of infectious diseases are not zero-sum trade-offs and can decrease fatalities and increase suffering if human rights are not respected

- Professor Salim Abdool Karim

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UNPACKING the unintended consequences of human rights violations during South Africa’s Covid-19 lockdown, a leading authority on the pandemic has called for integrating a public health response into a human rights approach because protecting human rights goes hand in hand with saving lives.

While praising the government for its swift response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Kwazulu-Natal epidemiologist Professor Salim Abdool Karim, has criticised the use of force during the lockdown, saying, “we did some things that were not so good”.

Mobilising the military resulted in several individuals’ deaths, including 44-year-old Collins Khosa in Alexandra on 10 April 2020.

Abdool Karim spoke on Tuesday at the 10th anniversary annual Kader Asmal Human Rights Lecture about the unintended consequences of the lockdown: rights violations, including disruptions to HIV care in 65 primary care clinics in KwaZulu-Natal, reduction in patient attendance at health facilities in South Africa with 39% of people wary of seeking treatment during the lockdown.

“Certainly, how the government swung the pendulum, saw it mobilise 70,000 troops in lockdown level 5 yet when we had looted, they mobilised 2,500 troops, showing an imbalance in understanding how to use the military,” he said.

A journal article, Frontiers in Psychiatry, warned that in responding to public health emergencies, government authorities have to tread between protecting the public’s health and safeguarding its inherent human rights, including education, freedom of movement, and access to healthcare.

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Speaking to The Sunday Independent after the lecture, Abdool Karim said there has to be a different approach in dealing with the public health response, ensuring it is integrated with a human rights ethos.

“The first is that the nature of how we’re going to deal with pandemics, not just Covid-19, but all pandemics. We have to find the middle ground where we carefully balance the response, the public health response, and the human rights, and we must protect the rights as much as we can,” he said.

Abdool Karim provides two conditions under which rights could be compromised via external condition externalities. So in other words, where an individual’s actions harm others. And I talked about that there’s evidence to justify it, it’s a reasonable person, we considered a justified cause of action. So that’s the first issue that human rights and the public health responses need to go together.

“The second is that I’m hoping that people will get a sense of that, what we are doing in this pandemic is that we made a really massive blunder, at a global level. In the distribution of vaccines. We chose to go the route of distributing vaccines based on market forces and based on political favour. “That’s not to be in vaccines, not in your tray to control a pandemic. I take a quite a lot about the importance of the vaccine equity because you can’t control this epidemic unless everybody gets vaccines. It doesn’t help if only one country has it and others don’t,” he said.