

The Statement of the MNHRC on the reopening of Schools in July Statement No. (5 / 2020)

Since the first positive case of COVID-19 was detected in Myanmar, the National-Level Central Committee on Prevention, Control and Treatment of COVID-19 and the Ministry of Health and Sports have made relentless efforts to control the spread of Coronavirus Disease with the cooperation of the public. The full trust of the public in the leadership and guidance of the State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Chairperson of the Central Committee and the effectiveness of the directives and instructions of the Ministry of Health and Sports has led to the scrupulous compliance of the public with those directives and instructions. Consequently, despite several limitations as a developing country, many satisfactory achievements have been made thus far in controlling the spread of the pandemic in the country. These achievements are telling a success story of excellent leadership reinforced with full cooperation of the people.

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights says “everyone has the right to education”. According to the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, COVID-19 has disrupted this right for more than 1.5 billion children across the world. For this reason, the MNHRC has been greatly concerned over the long closure of schools in the country. As the closure of school lasts longer than expect, not only right to education but also children’s physical and mental health will be also affected. In addition, to confine them long at home will expose them to many risks such as violence and maltreatment.

The MNHRC was therefore pleased to reportedly learn on 27 May that high schools will be reopened on 21 July, followed by the reopening of middle and primary schools after two weeks. These measures will have to be taken in the most daunting circumstances experienced in the country’s combat against the disease, and justifiably concerns have been expressed over these measures, particularly by parents and even teachers. The reasons that provoked these concerns are many and varied. For one thing, compared to the more mature adults, children cannot be expected, due to their nature, to behave at schools all the time in accordance with the health instructions. For another, limited space available in the confines of classrooms is an added difficulty in enforcing social distancing among the children. In addition, the large population of the school children in a school is a debilitating factor against stopping the transmission of the disease once an infection occurs. Last but not the least, reopening of schools even in more capable and developed countries is reported to be difficult. Besides, children at schools yearly transmit influenza to each other.

The parents want the schools to be reopened after the disease has been brought under control. However, when this will occur remains a conundrum and it will

not be in the long-term interest of the school children to keep hostage the decision to reopen schools to an extremely unpredictable condition. This left with us the option to reopen the schools only after the detailed regulations, guidelines and arrangements have been thoroughly considered and put in place. It will calm the concerns of the parents, teachers and students who would realize that these are the steps planned to be taken by the government. The MNHRC hopes that these measures are comprehensive enough to cover the interest of the vulnerable children in schools in areas hard of access, ethnic areas, disabled children, and those who cannot afford own private transport to and from school.

While the MNHRC is confident that mask wearing, sitting at set distance, hand washing and temperature taking will be ensured by the teachers and school authorities, it is also important to detect an infection at the earliest instance. In this regard, the MNHRC would like to recommend that:

“The planned regulations to be adopted provide for the official assignment of practicable number of health officials of an appropriate rank at each school reopened. Their core duties shall include the following, among others;

1. Monitor, together with the school authorities , the condition of school children in classrooms,
2. On detection of symptoms of COVID-19 in any school child, act immediately to inform the family and to separate the suspected child from the rest and coordinate with the health ministry authorities for quarantine purpose,
3. To prepare necessary arrangements to organize counselling for the infected child, the family concerned, and other children,
4. Undertake to trace the contacts between the suspected child and other children in the classroom for necessary further actions,
5. To coordinate, through assistance of the school authorities, with the concerned family to prevent further transmission of disease.”

While the MNHRC is aware of the overstretched human resources of the Ministry of Health and Sports under the present circumstances, it hopes that the official assignment of health officials of an appropriate level at reopened schools for the purpose of earliest detection of COVID-19 symptoms and swift necessary action will be incorporated in the rules to be adopted on the reopening of schools.

The Myanmar National Human Rights Commission

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