

**Statement of the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission on the COVID-19 and
Vaccination Statement No. (1/ 2021)**

1. 2020 is *annus horribilis* for Myanmar as with the rest of the world due to the scourge of COVID-19 pandemic that engulfed the globe. The well being of humanity itself was significantly undermined with serious implications for social, economic and political situations of effected countries and Myanmar was not spared either.
2. In such dire circumstances the drive to ensure human rights for all human beings apparently lost momentum and often even regressed in some places. The pandemic directly threatens the right to life and health while indirectly compromising many other basic rights relating to work, equity, information, indiscrimination, education, freedom of movement and in some instances freedom of expression. Human rights were at times overlooked in the struggle against COVID-19 where Governments choose to mobilize the public to rally behind them in their concerted effort to overcome the pandemic threat.
3. There have been concerns on and reports of increased human rights violations in the shadow of the pandemic in the form of discrimination, domestic violence, summary dismissals of employees, extreme restriction of movement and expression, denial of the right to information, internal displacement and forced migration as well as additional barriers against access to education and COVID-19 treatment.
4. Myanmar society has been blessed with socio-cultural capital to ameliorate many of those aforementioned rights violations through compassion and empathy yet there could had been isolated cases of transgressions and the authorities has tried their utmost to rectify them.
5. Nowadays, the advent of COVID-19 vaccine developed by many companies has raised hopes in the new year and 2021 promises to be the turning point in the effort to counter the pandemic threat. However, despite the World Health Organization's (WHO) efforts to advocate equitable allocation of vaccines around the world vaccine politics seems to have eclipsed humanitarian considerations and rich and powerful countries are appropriating the limited stocks by securing

advance purchase even before the actual productions began and formal approval given by competent regulating agencies. There have also been some concerns about the efficacy of the vaccine.

6. Due to the concerted efforts of our leaders Myanmar is able to secure supplies of vaccines from India to cover a substantial portion of our population and further arrangements are reportedly being made to get more from friendly countries to satisfy our needs. This effort not only requires a huge expenditure of foreign currency for purchase but also more financial, human and logistical resources to store, transport, distribute and finally administer the medicine which needs to be kept at extremely cold temperature. Given our relatively large population spread over vast territory with a varied topography it would be a huge, complex and demanding task for the authorities concerned. An endeavour without precedence that would stretch our meagre resources to the limit.
7. Meanwhile, as it is impossible to vaccinate everyone at the same time and the limited availability of vaccine there is a need to develop a priority scheme for inoculation. Everybody would agree that front line health workers including volunteers should have the right to be immunized as first cohort. Ranking the various sections of the population in the vaccination sequence is more difficult though we can learn from the experience of other countries which had already started the vaccination process. However, the priority scheme for Myanmar cannot be a copy of another country and it should be developed in the Myanmar context where social, cultural, economic and political circumstances are different and perhaps even unique in its own way. No doubt the authorities concerned are aware of those and would come up with the best fit for our country and people.
8. Nevertheless, the MNHRC believes that a human rights perspective can complement various other considerations in producing the best solution possible. In this way multiple rights may be fulfilled while enhancing the right to life and health of our people. In that respect what comes across as potential candidates for early vaccinations are certain sections of society who themselves may not be seen as vulnerable as old persons and those with underlying illnesses or hold important positions in administrative hierarchy but are prone to have multiple

contacts and interactions with the population at large through their functions and services. They may be identified as: schoolteachers, transport workers, service workers in banking retailing, food and beverages and manufacturing, street vendors, and food sellers. This is not an exhaustive list and given the fluid nature of their work and their roaming nature it could be quite taxing to track some of them down, but the benefits of immunizing those with a high potential for passing on the virus to the larger population could outweigh the difficulties involved.

Myanmar National Human Rights Commission

Date: 14 January 2021