The Deputy Director-General
Dr. Zsuzsanna Jakab
World Health Organization
Avenue Appia 20,
1211, Genève, Switzerland

May 26, 2020

#KeepItOn: Open letter appealing to the Deputy Director-General to urge the governments of Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, and Pakistan to end the ongoing internet shutdown amid COVID-19 pandemic

Your Excellency,

We write to you on behalf of the #KeepItOn coalition, a global network that unites more than 210 organizations from 75 countries that work to end internet shutdowns globally through grassroots advocacy, direct policy-maker engagement, technical support, and legal intervention. An internet shutdown has been defined as "an intentional disruption of internet or electronic communications, rendering them inaccessible or effectively unusable, for a specific population or within a location, often to exert control over the flow of information."

Access Now's STOP project, in collaboration with the #KeepItOn coalition, recorded at least 213 shutdowns in 2019, as compared to 196 instances in 2018. As shutdowns increase in number, they are lasting longer, affecting more people, and increasingly being targeted at vulnerable groups such as refugees. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread, these restrictions are severely impacting people's fundamental rights to freedom of expression, privacy, access to information, and health.

People are struggling to communicate with their families and loved ones. Most worryingly, the risks for minority groups are being compounded, as they are denied access to the health information on COVID-19 provided by the WHO and other experts that could save their lives.

We appeal to you to use the powers of your good office as the Deputy Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), to impress on the authorities in Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, and Pakistan the need to put an end to the ongoing internet disruptions affecting minority populations in these countries. Intentional disruptions of internet access prevent the spread of health information, and represent an affront to the WHO Constitution, which recognizes that the extension "to all peoples of the benefits of medical, psychological and related knowledge is essential to the fullest attainment of health," and further, that "[] informed opinion and active cooperation on the part of the public are of the utmost importance in the improvement of the health of the people." In many parts of the world, where internet access is intentionally degraded or shut down, informing oneself and engaging in online discourse about COVID-19

remains impossible.

The COVID-19 pandemic amplifies the need for access to universal, resilient, open, secure, and affordable access to information and communications technologies for all. As reiterated by your Director-General, access to credible and timely information and communications tools are of paramount importance to stop the spread of the virus and advance public health. We commend your efforts to increase access to reliable information through your partnership with WhatsApp and Facebook via the WHO Health Alert messaging service. Your organization can and should continue to play a role in impressing on states the need for universal internet access, especially for the vulnerable and marginalized communities you serve, and in light of the global pandemic.

Since March 2020, after lifting a seven-month blanket internet shutdown in Jammu and Kashmir, India's authorities have restricted internet access to only slow-speed 2G; since June 2019, the government of Myanmar has ordered all mobile phone operators to shut down internet access in nine townships in Rakhine and Chin States; since 2016, authorities have denied residents of the tribal districts in Pakistan access to the internet; and since September 2019, Bangladeshi authorities have cut off internet access in the refugee camps where more than a 800,000 Rohingya are currently living.

We received several reports indicating that residents in Jammu and Kashmir are unable to access information about COVID-19 due to the restriction on high-speed 4G internet access in these areas. Most important, doctors and other health workers who are fighting to prevent the spread of the virus are struggling to download intensive care management guidelines published on various digital platforms in the country. Research by experts in India has also shown that the restrictions on 4G connectivity make access to video conferencing – currently a critical lifeline throughout India and much of the world – virtually impossible to access and use.

In Pakistan, many residents of the tribal districts have been digitally disconnected since June 2016, despite an order from the Islamabad High Court to restore 3G/4G services. Many people in these areas lack information on how to protect themselves or stop the spread of the disease because the ongoing shutdown is preventing them from accessing the health information that is being shared online. The shutdown impacts over 3.7 million residents of these areas, who are unable to access healthcare services or primary information about COVID-19 provided by the government, WHO, and other relevant stakeholders working to contain the spread.

In May 2020, authorities in Myanmar lifted mobile internet restrictions in Maungdaw township in Rakhine State but maintained the internet shutdown in eight townships in Rakhine and Chin States. They contend that the shutdown does not disrupt the dissemination of information about COVID-19 because people in the affected areas can use mobile SMS services and public address systems to receive information provided by the state. While these platforms are important, the internet provides more opportunity for people to access information globally in a timely manner. Where possible, internet access also plays a crucial role in enabling people to work from home and educate children, self-quarantine, and observe other protocols to prevent the spread of the virus.

Internet access in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh has been shut down since September 2019. Though the authorities described the decision as a security measure, this broad restriction on communication was neither necessary nor proportionate, both of which are required under international human rights law and will hurt the COVID-19 response even as the first cases are being reported from the crowded settlement. Aid workers and community leaders rely on WhatsApp and other internet-based communication tools to coordinate emergency services and share important information in the camps. The shutdown prevents effective dissemination of coronavirus information as well as impeding aid workers' ability to conduct "contact tracing" to contain transmission of the virus. A community health volunteer said their group had used WhatsApp to connect medical supporters, but "[now] we cannot connect to provide our services."

The right to access information and use of digital technology is playing a critical role containing the COVID-19 virus. Access to accurate information is an indispensable step toward tackling the spread of COVID-19 and therefore should be the priority of every government. In addition, during this pandemic, access to the internet can enable people to avoid public spaces, a necessity for preventing person-to-person infection. Such access also makes it possible for many important activities that are now impacted by stay-at-home or shelter-in-place orders, from work to education to civic participation and beyond, to continue online.

Despite this, the governments of Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, and Pakistan have yet to heed the several appeals by local, regional, and international rights groups and bodies calling for the restoration of internet access in these areas.

We therefore respectfully call on your office to:

1. **Urge the governments of India, Myanmar, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and any other that shuts down the internet, to restore access to the internet in these regions to enable marginalized communities to enjoy their fundamental right of access to information, a core obligation of states and necessary to achieving the highest attainable standard of health.**
2. **Publicly denounce the use of internet shutdowns as a hindrance to the WHO mission and an acute threat to public health, and encourage governments to recognize the important role of the internet in times of crises.**
3. **Continue to prioritize efforts to increase access to reliable information and encourage active cooperation on the part of the public, by providing the latest news and information on COVID-19, in order to improve the health of all people.**

Overall, we recognize that this difficult time poses many unique challenges for your agency. However, to mitigate the impacts of this crisis in a manner that respects human rights, we encourage your support in extending more universal, resilient, open, secure, and affordable access to the internet, especially to those vulnerable and marginalized communities you serve.

Sincerely,

Access Now
ADISI-CAMEROUN
Advocacy Initiative for Development (AID)
African Freedom of Expression Exchange (AFEX)
Africtivites
Africa Open Data and Internet Research Foundation
AfroLeadership
Afrotribune
ARTICLE 19
Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain
Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio and Communication(BNNRC)
Bloggers of Zambia
Campaign for Human Rights and Development International (CHRDI)
Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA)
Derechos Digitales, Latin America
Feminism in India (FII)
Free Press Unlimited
Hiperderecho, Perú
Human Rights Foundation (HRF)
Human Rights Network for Journalists in Uganda (HRNJ-U)
Human Rights Watch
Gambia Press Union (GPU)
International Press Centre (IPC)
Internet Freedom Foundation, India
Iraqi Network for Social Media - INSM
JamiiForums, Tanzania
Kenya ICT Action Network (KICTANet)
KrantiKālī
Liberia Information Technology Student Union
Media Institute for Southern Africa, Zimbabwe
Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA)
Media Matters for Democracy (MMfD)
Media Rights Agenda (MRA)
Namibia Media Trust (NMT)
NetFreedom Pioneers (NFP)
Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI)
Open Net Korea
Paradigm Initiative (PIN)
PEN America
Reporters Without Borders (RSF)
Right2Know Campaign, South Africa
SMEX
Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network (SAFEnet)
Unwanted Witness Uganda

Villes et Communes
World Wide Web Foundation
WITNESS
Yemeni Organization for Development and Exchange Technology (YODET)