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Xenophobia masquerading as ‘Nationalism’. A Spillover Effect of COVID-19 Pandemic. Based on a Brief Social Media Synopsis.

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This policy brief provides information and identifies several key recommendations to assist governments, intergovernmental organisations, world policy-makers and other stakeholders in designing COVID-19 policy responses that can help to ensure the protection of migrants who fall/fell victims for the COVID-19-Related-Xenophobic attacks. Inform responses for the protection of these victims and those mistreated during the xenophobic attacks in countries other than their own, protected indiscriminately by the already existing relevant domestic and international migrants standards and laws.

Keywords: Africa, China, COVID-19, Discrimination, Global Public Policies, Intergovernmental Organisations, Migrants, Nationalism, United Nations (UN), United States of America (US), Social Media, Xenophobia

Summary of Recommendations

1. Immediate global policies to protect victims of COVID-19 related xenophobic attacks.
2. Strengthening of already existing institutions that protect migrants against Xenophobia.
3. Promoting social dialogue and inclusion of Xenophobia victims' in global COVID-19 response discourse.
4. Bilateral cooperation between countries of the victims' origination and country of current residence.

In this document

1. Introduction (Background).....	2
2. Impressions of COVID-19 Leading to Xenophobic Tendencies.	2
2.1. Derogatory Language in Media Reports and Statements by Politicians.	2
2.2. Unfair COVID-19 Related Treatment and Displacement of Migrants.	3
3. COVID-19 Related Hate Speech on Social Media Platforms	3
3.1. Widespread tweets containing hate speech, mostly against Asians.....	4
3.2. Growth in Internet traffic to prominent hate sites.....	4
4. Policy Implication	5
4.1. International regimes as COVID-19 Xenophobia response:	5
4.2. National Action Plans Needed to Counter Intolerance:	5
5. Conclusion	5
6. Key Terms	5

1. Introduction

Major crises have major consequences, usually unforeseen. Pessimistic outcomes are easy to imagine. Nationalism, isolationism, xenophobia, and attacks on the liberal world order have been increasing for years, and that trend will only be accelerated by the pandemic (Francis Fukuyama: 2020).¹

On the 8th of May 2020, the Human Rights Watch issued a statement, calling upon governments to take urgent steps to prevent racist and xenophobic violence and discrimination linked to the COVID-19 pandemic aimed at prosecuting racial attacks against Asians and people of Asian descent. This statement echoed the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres words that said "the pandemic continues to unleash a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scaremongering" and urged governments to "act now to strengthen the immunity of our societies against the virus of hate."² Since the outbreak of the pandemic, migrants (not only Asians or people of Asian descent), have been targets of derogatory language in media reports and statements by politicians as well as on social media platforms, where hate speech related to COVID-19 also appears to have spread extensively.

2. Impressions of COVID-19 Leading to Xenophobic Tendencies.

2.1. Derogatory Language in Media Reports and Statements by Politicians.

Government leaders and senior officials in some instances have directly or indirectly encouraged hate crimes, racism, or xenophobia by using anti-Chinese rhetoric. Several political parties and groups, including in the United States, United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Greece, France, and Germany have also latched onto the COVID-19 crisis to advance anti-immigrant, white supremacist, ultra-nationalist, anti-semitic, and xenophobic conspiracy theories that demonize refugees, foreigners, prominent individuals, and political leaders.³

The former US President Donald Trump's use of the term "Chinese virus" and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's use of "Wuhan virus" may have encouraged the use of hate speech in the US. Although by late March Trump stepped back from using the term and issued a tweet in support of "our Asian-American community," he has not directed any

specific governmental response toward protecting Asians and people of Asian descent.

The governor of the Veneto region of Italy, an early epicentre of the pandemic, told journalists in February that the country would be better than China in handling the virus due to Italians' "culturally strong attention to hygiene, washing hands, taking showers, whereas we have all seen the Chinese eating mice alive." He later apologized. Brazil's education minister ridiculed Chinese people in a tweet suggesting that the pandemic was part of the Chinese government's "plan for world domination."

This was not only a European problem only. Several cases evidenced with arising xenophobia cases during the COVID-19 lockdown phase in African countries like Uganda, Ethiopia, and South Africa. On South Africa's xenophobia rise during the COVID-19 Anastasya Eliseeva (2020), noted that racist and xenophobic politicians have abused the coronavirus pandemic and subsequent national lockdowns to bang the drum for their chauvinism and propaganda.⁴ Noting that, in South Africa, the most violent wave of xenophobic violence the country that happened in May 2008, with that reports suggested the violence and hatred were fuelled by intense competition for jobs and housing, and often incited by local politicians. Now, as South Africa is buffeted by the twin headwinds of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic disaster accompanying it, people with significant influence in the ruling party are actively inciting xenophobia.

The first major action the state undertook in response to the virus was led by Minister of Public Works, who, in high 'Trumpian' fashion, oversaw the building of a fence along the border with Zimbabwe. Then Minister of Small Business Development, implied that only grocery shops owned and managed by South Africans would be allowed to remain open during the lockdown. Minister of Employment and Labour recently said: "We must introduce ... quotas and stick to [them] and be very hard ... In doing that we must not be seen to be xenophobic or violating international conventions, but at the same time protect our national interests."⁵

To sum the global events and unfolding of all that was said and done by political figures involved in negligently perpetuating derogatory statements that propagated racism, discrimination and xenophobia in the name of protecting national citizens or curdle nationalist sentiments to garn solidarity in a time of a crisis, did not do any good on the broader spectacle as it rose xenophobic sentiments domestically.

1 Foreign Affairs (July-August): <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2020-06-09/pandemic-and-political-order>

2 <https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/we-must-act-now-strengthen-immunity-our-societies-against-virus-hate>

3 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-worldwide>

4 <https://allafrica.com/stories/202005150692.html>

5 <https://allafrica.com/stories/202005150692.html>

2.2. Unfair COVID-19 Related Treatment and Displacement of Migrants.

Increases in racist rhetoric have coincided with increases in racist attacks. Since February, Asians and people of Asian descent around the world have been subjected to attacks and beatings, violent bullying, threats, racist abuse, and discrimination that appear linked to the pandemic. On the other hand, migrants in different destination countries or their current country of residence have been facing as much unfair treatment, from discrimination, unfair displacements and even xenophobic physical attacks.

In Italy, the civil society group Lunaria since February has collected over 50 reports and media accounts of assaults, verbal harassment, bullying, and discrimination against people of Asian descent. Human rights and other groups in France, Australia, and Russia have also told Human Rights Watch of COVID-19-related attacks and harassment of people of Asian descent.

In the UK, Asian people have been punched in the face and taunted, accused of spreading coronavirus. Two women attacked Chinese students in Australia, punching and kicking one and yelling "Go back to China" and "you fucking immigrants." Two men attacked a Chinese-American in Spain and beat him so badly that he was in a coma for two days. A man with a knife attacked a Burmese family in Texas.

In Africa, there have been reports of discrimination and attacks on Asian people accused of carrying coronavirus, as well as foreigners generally, including in Kenya, Ethiopia, and South Africa. In Brazil, the media have reported harassment and shunning of people of Asian descent. As Coronavirus fades in China, nationalism and xenophobia flare.⁶ Now that the pandemic is raging outside China's borders, foreigners are being shunned, barred from public spaces and even evicted.

In some instances, governments have imposed strict lockdowns that indiscriminately affect only foreign workers without providing adequate health care, financial assistance, or other services that many workers now need to survive. In early May, the Malaysian authorities carried out mass raids to detain refugees and migrant workers, suggesting without basis that the migrant community and Rohingya refugees were responsible for the spread of COVID-19.

Across the Middle East, persistent racist rhetoric in public discourse against foreign workers intensified after several

COVID-19 outbreaks occurred in densely populated segregated areas for foreign workers, most of whom are Asian.

In early April 2020, Chinese authorities in the southern city of Guangzhou, Guangdong province, which has China's largest African community, began a campaign to forcibly test Africans for the coronavirus, and ordered them to self-isolate or to quarantine in designated hotels. Landlords then evicted African residents, forcing many to sleep on the street, and hotels, shops, and restaurants refused African customers. Other foreign groups have generally not been subjected to similar treatment.

According to IOM, stigmatization of certain groups during crises is not new. From terrorism to disease outbreaks, migrants have often been scapegoated for endangering native populations. "Diseases have at times been perceived as 'foreign,'" as was the case with cholera in the 1830s, HIV/AIDS in the 1980s or, more recently, with H1N1 influenza.⁷

COVID-19 is no exception, as people of Asian and European descent - and migrants more generally - have been stigmatized for spreading the coronavirus. Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories have spread, and COVID-19-related anti-Muslim attacks have occurred. Many have endured verbal and physical assaults, and at times, institutional exclusion from the receiving society.

As instances of hate speech, stigma, discrimination and xenophobia continue to rise as a result of COVID-19, migrants and refugees are among those who have falsely been blamed and vilified for spreading the virus thus are unfairly mistreated and displaced. Evidently with many cases all over Europe where governments embarked on repatriation missions for their citizens during the peak of the pandemic. Meanwhile, unsafe displacements were taking place in Myanmar where thousands of jobless migrant workers return home from Thailand, South Africa forced migrant displacement of 14,000 Mozambican migrants returned home from South Africa and about 75 of the Malawians displaced by xenophobic attacks returned home.⁸

3. COVID-19 Related Hate Speech on Social Media Platforms.

Widespread closures enforced in response to the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak have confined most people to their homes and left them spending a lot more time online.

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/16/world/asia/coronavirus-china-nationalism.htm>

⁷ <https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/covid-19-un-counters-pandemic-related-hate-and-xenophobia>

⁸ <https://www.voanews.com/africa/malawi-repatriates-citizens-targeted-south-africa>

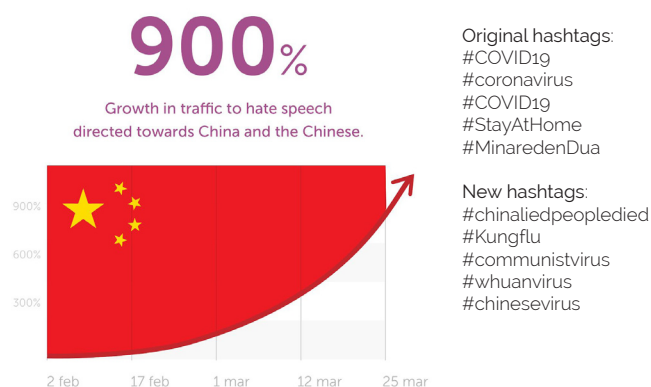
The new reality of living entirely within four walls has made the western world entirely dependent on online platforms for communication, entertainment, work, and education. People were spending more and more time on social networks, communication apps, chat rooms and gaming services, and the problems endemic to these platforms – hate, abuse, toxicity and bullying – have become accentuated. According to L1ght: 'Toxicity During Coronavirus Report' (2020), the data showed that much of the hate and abuse is being directed towards China and its population, as well as individuals of Asian origin in other parts of the world.⁹

Meanwhile, whereas typically today's children and teenagers balance their social commitments between in-person and online-based settings, they now only interact with one another online. The research revealed a worrying rise in online toxicity and cyberbullying among children, precisely when they are most reliant on digital platforms.

L1ght analyzed millions of websites, social networks, teen chatting forums, and gaming sites from December 2019 to today. They examined text alongside images, videos, and voice recordings to identify increases in hate speech, cyberbullying, and general online toxicity during the COVID-19 global lockdown phase. In trying to analyse the COVID-19 related hate speech on social platforms, L1ght identified 2 indicators that stress discrimination and xenophobic sentiments on social platforms.

3.1. Widespread tweets containing hate speech, mostly against Asians.

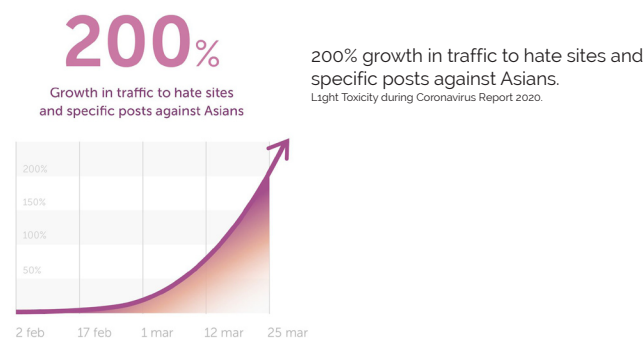
Toxic tweets using explicit language to accuse Asians of carrying the coronavirus and blaming people of Asian origin as a collective for spreading the virus. The research also witnessed a shift in the use of terminology and search engines jargon surrounding the Coronavirus.



900% in hate speech on Twitter directed towards China and the Chinese.
L1ght Toxicity during Coronavirus Report 2020.

⁹ L1ght (2020) 'Toxicity During Coronavirus Report': https://l1ght.com/Toxicity_during_coronavirus_Report-L1ght.pdf

3.2. Growth in Internet traffic to prominent hate sites



L1ght believes that the responsibility for stamping out online toxicity lies with big tech companies, as opposed to users themselves. Public regulation has to also take a centre stage particularly governments in which most of the AI tech platforms is developed to impose much stricter policy on tech developers to be sensitive towards issues of racism, xenophobia, discrimination etc. being used on tech platforms. Social media companies, also, have a responsibility to protect users against hateful and xenophobic content on their platforms and should invest adequate resources to addressing it and mitigating its harm.¹⁰

The events during the COVID-19 phase such as of April 10 are part of the response to growing Chinese fear of a reemergence of coronavirus infection bringing the anti-African feelings in China. In Chinese media, Africans are often characterized as backward or primitive and blackness as unattractive. Virulent racism common on social media is largely unchecked by censors, including claims that Africans are rapists, drug dealers, or AIDS carriers.¹¹

Due to uncensored social media paranoia that perpetuated the narrative that Africans were spreading the coronavirus, African expats were left at the mercy of xenophobic attitudes and heavy-handed enforcement. "They are accusing us of having the virus," Tobenna Victor, an evicted Nigerian student, told the BBC. A viral post shows McDonald's staff in a restaurant in Guangzhou holding a sign that says: "We've been informed that from now on black people are not allowed to enter the restaurant." Rumors quickly circulated that "300,000 black people in Guangzhou were setting off a second epidemic," and even though public officials later debunked that myth, the damage to domestic perceptions in China had been done.¹²

Such events that were perpetrated on social media and that

¹⁰ <https://www.hrw.org/node/375044/>

^{11, 12} <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/15/chinas-racism-is-wrecking-its-success-in-africa/>

led to the mistreatment of migrants, citizens associated themselves with nationalistic perspective however an in-depth scrutiny into such actions they portrayed xenophobic tendencies.

4. Policy Implication

4.1. International regimes as COVID-19 Xenophobia response:

Stricter penalties can be imposed for offenders of xenophobic attacks both at domestic governments' level and international level of politics. Countries that are engaged and facilitating violence should also face international community penalties that can motivate governance to improve domestic governance. Like in the imposition of economic sanctions on undemocratic and abuse of human rights for offending states, perpetrators of COVID-19 related xenophobia should be put in place to enforce International Legal Obligations.

4.2. National Action Plans Needed to Counter Intolerance:

Governments need to take urgent action to adopt new action plans to address the wave of COVID-19 racism and xenophobia as part of their COVID-19 response especially in countries that were affected. The UN committee responsible for monitoring compliance with the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination,¹³ which 182 countries have ratified, has recommended that governments adopt "national action plans against racial discrimination." Plans should lay out specific approaches to combat racism and discrimination, from enhanced policing of hate crimes to public messaging and education programming encouraging tolerance. Governments need to take urgent action to adopt new action plans to address the wave of COVID-19 racism and xenophobia.

5. Conclusion.

Given the upsurge in anti-migrant, racist, discriminatory and xenophobic related issues to the COVID-19 pandemic, all governments should adopt new action plans to address emerging forms of discrimination and xenophobia tailored to the new and changing circumstances (Human Rights Watch 2020). Although this paper has substantiated enough evidence of xenophobic attacks aimed at Asian and people of Asian descent, the xenophobic trends have also been witnessed on non-Asian people across the globe, that if not immediate global governance is realized, more repercussions on the issues of racism, discrimination,

xenophobia masked as nationalist sentiments are likely to keep penetrating international relations.

6. Key Terms

Xenophobia

According to the UNHRC, Xenophobia is a broad notion, associated with a variety of meanings. The term "xenophobia" comes from the Greek words ξένος (Xenos), meaning "foreigner", "stranger", and φόβος (Phobos), meaning "fear". Manifestations of xenophobia are usually triggered by intense dislike or hatred against people that are perceived as outsiders, strangers or foreigners to a group, community or nation, based on their presumed or real descent, national, ethnic or social origin, race, colour, religion, gender, sexual orientation or other grounds. Manifestations of xenophobia include acts of direct discrimination, hostility or violence and incitement to hatred. Xenophobic acts are intentional as the goal is to humiliate, denigrate and/or hurt the person(s) and the "associated" group of people.¹⁴

Nationalism

Many authors virtually equate nationalism with the consciousness of one's nationality. Hayes (1960:2), for example, writes: "In simplest terms, nationalism may be defined as a fusion of patriotism with the consciousness of nationality." Nationalism is defined similarly by Snyder (1964:2): "Nationalism is a condition of mind, feeling, or sentiment of a group of people living in a well-defined geographical area, speaking a common language, professing a literature in which the aspirations of the nation have been expressed, being attached to the common traditions, and, in some cases, having a common origin."¹⁵

¹³ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cerd.aspx>

¹⁴ <https://nhri.ohchr.org/EN/Themes/Racial/Documents/Xenophobia.pdf>

¹⁵ D. Kecmanovic, *The Mass Psychology of Ethnonationalism*: Springer Science+Business Media New York 1996