Civil Society Briefing - UPR of the United States
Opening Remarks
Presented by Salimah Hankins, US Human Rights Network

My name is Salimah Hankins, Interim Executive Director of the US Human Rights Network. We are a Network of over 300 member and partner organizations coordinating US Civil Society’s engagement with international bodies. The briefing is also co-sponsored by a number of organizations who are listed on the Agenda you should have received.

Thank you, esteemed representatives from governments around the world who have agreed to join us. We are very grateful to you for taking the time to attend this briefing on human rights in the United States, as we all navigate the current global health and economic crisis. We want to acknowledge that the pandemic is impacting virtually every country, and that we send our heartfelt expression of solidarity to civil society groups around the world working day and night (some very closely with their governments) to address the devastating impact of the pandemic.

Due to the cancellation of side events in Geneva last month and the cancellation of the in-person briefing organized by UPR-Info on April first, we decided to move forward with this virtual briefing and focus on COVID-19, and its impact on the most vulnerable in our society. As you know, the Universal Periodic Review of the US has been postponed until November. However, the US report was due in February and as far as we know it has not been submitted yet - so there is time for the US to include responses to the pandemic in its report. We sent a letter to the Department of State last week, asking that the government include information on US responses to COVID-19 in its UPR report to the Human Rights Council.

We also want to note that in the lead up to the third cycle of the UPR, the US has had very little civil society engagement; we hope the postponement allows for meaningful engagement with civil society to ensure a robust and effective review.

Before we launch into the speakers, we have a few logistical items that we would like for you to know about:

- We will have a question and answer session at the end of all of the presentations. Please type your questions into the chat box and we will ask our presenters to answer them. Please identify yourself and your Mission when you ask your question.
- These presentations are prepared by an array of organizations, not all of whom can be with us today. Some questions may require the gathering of further information, so we will follow-up with an email to any unanswered questions.
- This briefing is being recorded, but the information in the chats and any questions asked by the missions will be off-the-record and will not be shared publicly.
- For speakers, we will play a chime when you have one minute remaining in your presentation, and another chime when your time is over. Please unmute yourself when it is time for your presentation and share and unshare your screen when you’re done.

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The current COVID-19 pandemic is the most pressing human rights crisis of our time and communities across the United States are deeply and irreversibly impacted. We are focusing on 7 broad topics today, which cover some of the key ways that COVID-19 is affecting communities in the US, most of whom have long faced and continue to face structural discrimination and marginalization and are even more vulnerable to abuse today.

Asian American are being particularly targeted during this crisis. Old racist tropes are being replayed of Asians being seen as unclean and unfit for citizenship in the US. This rhetoric is coming from the very top with President Trump calling COVID-19 “the Chinese virus.” There is currently a surge in global and national anti-Asian racism during the pandemic, including verbal, physical, and online attacks against Asian people or Asian-appearing people.

STOP APPI HATE has received around 100 reports a day of verbal and physical racist attacks in the US since the end of March, which is likely much lower than the actual number. On March 14, three Asian American family members, including a 2-year-old and 6-year-old, were stabbed in a grocery store hate crime in Texas by a man who said they were spreading the coronavirus.

People of African Descent (PAD) in the US are dying at an alarming rate due to the virus. In Milwaukee County - 81% of people who died were PAD even though PAD make up only 27% of the population. In Louisiana and Chicago - PAD account for more than half of those who have tested positive and 70% and 72% respectively, of virus-related fatalities are PAD even though they make up approximately a third of the population in these states. UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent Statement on this crisis and they said “Thus far, no protection efforts have focused the public health response on the specific vulnerabilities of people of African descent.”

Structural/systemic and socio-economic factors play a part in the disproportionate deaths. PAD are less likely to be able to work from home and are more likely to have service jobs requiring them to work during the pandemic. Ongoing disparities in healthcare contribute to pre-existing conditions and PAD are less likely to be insured. Even when wearing a mask, PAD can be viewed with suspicion. Doctors are less likely to test PAD for COVID-19 even if they are displaying the same symptoms as their white counterparts. Disparities in testing can lead to considerably worse outcomes since the disease progresses very quickly.