

Prime Minister Robert Abela
Office of the Prime Minister
Auberge de Castille
Valletta

cc Superintendent for Public Health, Dr Charmaine Gauci
cc Minister of Health, Dr Christopher Fearne
cc Minister for Home Affairs, Byron Camilleri

15 April 2020

Dear Prime Minister,

Re: Open letter from healthcare professionals and students in healthcare

We are writing to you to bring to your attention our position on the current events happening in Malta's search and rescue area (SAR) and Malta's decision to close its ports to people rescued at sea.

The Armed Forces of Malta are being prevented from rescuing any boats in distress within Malta's SAR. This comes as a shock to us and raises the question: must our COVID-19 response come at the expense of human rights?

The Hippocratic oath clearly states: "I will remember that I remain a member of society, with special obligations to all my fellow human beings, those sound of mind and body as well as the infirm." In this situation, we must act to fulfill our obligations.

While boats have been adrift in Maltese waters, 15 people have died. Other boats have been illegally pushed back into Libya, an active war zone. Rescue ships that have rescued people in distress are not allowed to disembark their passengers in any ports, including Malta's. They are left stuck at sea, slowly exhausting their supplies with each passing day.

This refusal has ignited a backlash from all over Europe. Malta's government is defending its decision by stating:

*"Malta is not in a position to offer a safe place for these immigrants, especially at a time of great challenges in the health sector, and law enforcement. The situation today calls for all local resources, including the Armed Forces, to be focused on the fight against the spread of the coronavirus."*¹

In times of a pandemic, many otherwise normal actions come with a risk. Some of these risks we have taken. For example, not enforcing a full public lockdown and allowing the hunting season to commence. While rescuing people in distress at sea and allowing them to disembark in Malta is not totally risk-free, it does not justify violating human rights and there are steps that can be taken to mitigate risk.

We acknowledge that the current COVID-19 situation in Malta is serious. However, allowing people to die in the name of public health is contradictory and utterly nonsensical. We cannot abandon our moral and ethical responsibilities and the state likewise cannot abandon its positive obligation to protect the right to life.

We ask the prime minister to reconsider his stance and to come to the aid of those whose lives are at risk at sea. If we allow the government to pay for public health with people's lives, we will have failed in our obligations as citizens, healthcare workers, and as a nation.

¹ Statement to media of 9 April 2020.

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Yours sincerely,

Ms Shayma Shamo
Dr Alexander Clayman

and (names in alphabetical order)

Dr Aaron Schembri
Mr Abdullah Almalki
Ms Abigail Magro
Dr Adriyana Vassallo
Mr Aidan Magri
Professor Albert Fenech
Dr Alexandra Gauci Farrugia
Dr Alexandra Tortell
Mr Alistair Gollcher
Ms Alya Dashti
Ms Amber Sammut
Dr Andee Agius
Mr André Camilleri
Mr Andre Delicata
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Mr Andrea Cuschieri
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