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Mr. Thomas L. Vajda
Senior Bureau Official
Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs
United States Department of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Mr. Vajda,

I write to request that you and your colleagues at the Department of State continue to urge governments in South Asia to reverse telecommunications restrictions and other policies that harm vulnerable populations, particularly as they face a pandemic.

The Government of India has partially ended its communications blackout in the Kashmir region, including the longest internet shutdown ever imposed in a democracy.¹ But remaining restrictions on high-speed internet are preventing doctors from accessing COVID-19 treatment guidance, hindering access to telemedicine, and impacting the efficacy of social media awareness campaigns about the virus.² Although videoconferencing is helping people around the world cope with isolation during lockdowns, a lack of access to this technology puts further strain on the 1.8 million Kashmiris, or nearly half of all adults, who have some form of mental illness after decades of conflict.³

I ask that you continue to raise this issue with your Indian counterparts, and stress that communications restrictions inflict harm not only on affected communities, but also on India's democracy and economy. India's pursuit of pluralistic and open government after its long independence struggle has served as an inspiration to other aspiring democracies around the world. Recent actions by the Indian government — in Kashmir and across the country, including

¹ Niha Masih, Shams Irfan, and Joanna Slater, *India's Internet shutdown in Kashmir is the longest ever in a democracy*, Wash. Post (Dec. 16, 2019), https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/indias-internet-shutdown-in-kashmir-is-now-the-longest-ever-in-a-democracy/2019/12/15/bb0693ea-1dfc-11ea-977a-15a6710ed6da_story.html.

² Muddasir Ali, *Slow Internet Is Speeding the Spread of the Coronavirus in Kashmir*, Foreign Policy (Apr. 13, 2020), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/13/slow-internet-speeding-spread-coronavirus-kashmir-india-lockdown/>.

³ Sameer Yasir, *Kashmir, Under Siege and Lockdown, Faces a Mental Health Crisis*, N.Y. Times (Apr. 26, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/26/world/asia/kashmir-india-mental-health-coronavirus.html>.

efforts to restrict citizenship,⁴ failures to address anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence,⁵ and intimidation of journalists⁶ — seemingly contradict those principles and amplify concerns regarding India’s treatment of minorities and its commitments to freedom of the press and human rights. I urge the State Department to take steps to act on the recommendations related to India in the Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.⁷ These include the report’s recommendations to strengthen engagement with communities affected by discrimination and to designate India as a country of particular concern for engaging in and tolerating religious freedom violations.

Pakistan, already designated as a country of particular concern regarding religious freedom, has been restricting telecommunications access in districts of the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas since 2016. Although the Islamabad High Court has ordered the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority to immediately restore 3G and 4G internet service in those districts, the order has not been carried out.⁸ There is thus a worrying lack of understanding in the region about the dangers the coronavirus poses,⁹ and thousands of Pakistani university students who have been forced back home during the lockdown have no way to continue their education.¹⁰ I urge you to press your counterparts in Islamabad to follow through on the Prime Minister’s March 9, 2020 remarks, in which he directed his government to ensure that the areas in question gain 3G and 4G access.¹¹

In Bangladesh, the government’s telecommunications restrictions are harming Rohingya refugees as well as Bangladeshis. I appreciate that the Government of Bangladesh has faced internal criticism for its generous willingness to host the thousands of people who fled their homes to escape atrocities committed by the Burmese military. But with confirmed cases of COVID-19 in both the Rohingya camps and the Bangladesh host community in Cox’s Bazar, lack of access to mobile phones and internet is exacerbating the outbreak and hindering an adequate response. In order to curb the spread of coronavirus in the camps and neighboring areas, it is imperative for Bangladesh to allow the Rohingya community to legally acquire SIM

⁴ Human Rights Watch, “*Shoot the Traitors*”: *Discrimination Against Muslims under India’s New Citizenship Policy* (Apr. 2020), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/09/india-protests-attacks-over-new-citizenship-law>.

⁵ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report 2020* (Apr. 2020), p. 20, https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_42720_new_0.pdf.

⁶ Reporters Without Borders, *Police violence against journalists covering protests in India* (Dec. 19, 2019), <https://rsf.org/en/news/police-violence-against-journalists-covering-protests-india>.

⁷ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report 2020* (Apr. 2020), p. 20, https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_42720_new_0.pdf.

⁸ *Pakistani Court Orders Internet Access For Pashtun Students During Coronavirus Lockdown*, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (Apr. 14, 2020), <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/pakistani-court-orders-internet-access-for-pashtun-students-during-coronavirus-lockdown/30554434.html>.

⁹ Hija Kamran, *An Internet Shutdown Is Keeping Coronavirus Information From Millions in Pakistan*, Slate (Apr. 1, 2020), <https://slate.com/technology/2020/04/coronavirus-covid19-pakistan-internet-shutdown-fata.html>.

¹⁰ *Pakistani Court Orders Internet Access For Pashtun Students During Coronavirus Lockdown*, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (Apr. 14, 2020), <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/pakistani-court-orders-internet-access-for-pashtun-students-during-coronavirus-lockdown/30554434.html>.

¹¹ *PM Imran expresses 'heartfelt wish' for peace in Afghanistan following accord*, Dawn (Mar. 9, 2020), <https://www.dawn.com/news/1539576>.

cards and to enable access to 3G and 4G telecommunications and internet in the camps to support the delivery of lifesaving services.

Without reliable mobile data and telecommunications, those that are symptomatic must seek assistance in person, risking unnecessary exposure to others. The inability to disseminate critical information on hygiene and guidance on how to care for oneself and family members with suspected cases of COVID-19 has engendered misinformation as well as mistrust of humanitarian workers. Humanitarian agencies also need remote access to continue programs that help mitigate violence and trafficking and to support distance learning, child protection, and mental health and psychosocial support programming. Children and other vulnerable groups must not be left without key support functions for months on end.

I ask that you urge the Government of Bangladesh to reverse these communications restrictions immediately. Although such restrictions hindered humanitarian assistance even before the pandemic, COVID-19 and the impending rainy season add new urgency.¹² As the United States continues to press governments across the region to uphold their commitments to the Bali Process mechanism and allow safe disembarkation for Rohingya still stranded at sea, I further ask you to urge the Bangladeshi government to take additional steps to improve the humanitarian situation. Such steps should include permanently suspending efforts to install fencing around Rohingya camps, discontinuing the use of rhetoric that endangers refugees and humanitarian workers, and immediately reversing the decision to hold certain refugees on flood-prone Bhashan Char without a comprehensive assessment of the island.¹³

The protection of vulnerable populations in South Asia is a complex challenge, yet the lifting of communications restrictions is both immediately feasible and requires little in the way of resources or supplies. Strong U.S. advocacy on this issue could provide a lifeline to the impacted communities, who are already among the world's most vulnerable. I appreciate your ongoing efforts to promote public health and human rights in South and Central Asia, and I thank you for your attention to this urgent matter.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

¹² *Bangladesh Urged to Lift Telecom Ban on Rohingya Camps to Ease COVID-19 Risks*, VOA News (Apr. 2, 2020), <https://www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/bangladesh-urged-lift-telecom-ban-rohingya-camps-ease-covid-19>.

¹³ *Agence France-Presse, Rohingya refugees relocated to controversial Bangladesh island after weeks at sea*, Yahoo News (May 3, 2020), <https://news.yahoo.com/rohingya-refugees-relocated-controversial-bangladesh-island-weeks-sea-152116893.html>.