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ORAL STATEMENT
Item 2: Enhanced Interactive Dialogue on COVID-19

STATES MUST RESPECT AND PROTECT THE RIGHTS OF FRONTLINE WORKERS IN CONTEXT OF COVID-19

UN Human Rights Council
Forty-fifth session
14 September – 6 October 2020

Madam President,

We thank the High Commissioner for her update, and continued efforts to provide clear guidance and hold states to their human rights commitments and obligations in the context of COVID-19.

Amnesty International is alarmed by the continued lack of protection of the rights of frontline workers, including health workers, who are making the greatest sacrifices to fight the pandemic. Active protection of their rights, while supporting and consulting them, will be critical to overcome the pandemic.

Amnesty's research has found that over 7,000 health workers have died from COVID-19 since the pandemic began. The real figure is likely to be much higher given the lack of reporting in many countries and the limited visibility and consideration given to some occupations, such as cleaners, community care workers and those in nursing homes. Among health workers, women and people from ethnic minorities have often been hardest hit. The number of deaths in other frontline occupations is largely unknown.

In almost every country we monitored, health workers raised concerns about their health and safety at work including shortages of personal protective equipment. Shockingly, in over half the countries we assessed, we found cases where health workers faced reprisals from governments or employers for speaking out about unsafe conditions, protesting, or taking industrial action. For example in Egypt, nine doctors are currently in prison charged with 'spreading false news' and 'terrorism' after speaking out about conditions, and in Malaysia five people face criminal charges after protesting about safety of hospital workers.

Madam President,

Our research makes clear the need for states to urgently scale up the production and distribution of protective equipment to ensure that all workers exposed to Covid-19 receive what

they need, including cleaners, care workers and others who are often overlooked and must ensure effective international cooperation and assistance to ensure adequate and equal access.

All States should: listen to, and consult, frontline workers; respect their freedoms to organise and speak out; and ensure they are free from reprisals. This will be critical to ensuring an effective response to the pandemic.

Madam High Commissioner,

Given the global shortage of protective equipment, and the procurement difficulties faced by some countries, what more must be done to ensure access to life-saving equipment for health and other frontline workers everywhere, and on an equal basis?

Thank you.