01 July 2020

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Dr Zafar Mirza
State Minister of Health, Pakistan
Ministry of National Health Services Regulations & Coordination,
3rd Floor Kohsar Block,
Islamabad
+92-51-9245746

RE: Protection of health workers in Pakistan

Dear Dr Zafar Mirza,

I am writing to you out of extreme concern for the lives and safety of health workers in Pakistan, who have played an extraordinary and critically important role in the response to the COVID-19 outbreak.

While everyone remains at risk of contracting COVID-19, health workers are particularly vulnerable as they are consistently and repeatedly exposed to the virus. As of 29 June 2020, official figures record at least 5,367 health workers across Pakistan being infected with COVID-19, with 58 dead as a result[1].

This is a devastating tally.

That doctors, nurses, paramedics, ambulance drivers and other medical staff continue to help people in the face of such imminent danger to their lives underscores their courage. It also highlights how much they deserve not only our gratitude but also the state's protection.

Amnesty International has recorded several instances of violence against health workers across Pakistan since April. Hospitals have been vandalized, many doctors have been attacked, and one was even shot by a member of the Counter Terrorism Force[2]. The Young Doctors Association says health workers are being attacked on a daily basis and that the exact number is "beyond count."[3]

Most of the attacks against health workers have come either after they followed standard operating procedures for returning the body of a COVID-19 victim to their relatives, or where medical facilities have been unable to provide medical care due to an acute scarcity of resources. On 29 May 2020, the Dr Ruth Pfau Civil Hospital was vandalized by an angry mob in Karachi after there was a delay in handing over the body of a suspected COVID-19 patient to their family[4]. On 2 June 2020, a doctor was attacked in Peshawar after an altercation with the family members of an

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Documents from the Ministry of National Health Services, Regulations and Coordination, available with Amnesty International.

[2] See Cop Sent on Remand for Hospital Shooting, *The Express Tribune*, 20 June 2020 https://tribune.com.pk/story/2246432/1-cop-sent-remand-hospital-shooting

[3] Amnesty International interview with Young Doctors Association on 23 June 2020, Lahore

[4] See Mob Vandalizes Karachi Civil Hospital After Delay in Handing Over Body of Covid Patient, *Dawn*, 20 May 2020 https://www.dawn.com/news/1560400

infected patient, where he was stripped of his personal protection equipment and punched in the face, breaking his nose[5]. There are multiple videos of doctors and nurses being harassed online[6]. According to media reports, there have been at least 20 attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province alone[7].

There have been several statements from ministers claiming that hospitals have the necessary resources, despite reports that hospitals have been forced to turn away even critical patients, given the shortage of beds, ventilators and other life-saving equipment[8]. This puts health workers in danger as people do not believe them when they say they do not have room for more patients.

The frustration and distress of families who are being impacted by COVID-19 is understandable, whether that is through the death of a loved one or feeling like they could have prevented a death had the resources been available. Unfortunately, given its scale, even the best and most well-resourced healthcare systems have struggled to cope with the pandemic. In such an environment, it is critical that the Government of Pakistan takes all reasonable measures to protect health workers on the frontlines of the pandemic.

Amnesty International urges you to:

- Promptly investigate any attacks or acts of violence against health workers in a thorough, independent and impartial manner, and perpetrators must be brought to account. Make explicit a zero-tolerance attitude to violence and discrimination against health workers. In doing so, acknowledge that some health workers may be at additional or specific risk due to their multiple and intersecting identities, and this should be factored into the response.

- Ensure that employers – whether public or private provide all health workers with adequate PPE to protect themselves during the COVID-19 pandemic, in line with international standards.

- Immediately put in place protocols to ensure that managers of all facilities where health workers work conduct an analysis of what risks their staff face regarding violence and put in place adequate security measures to address these threats.

- Set up systems to document any violent incidents, discrimination and/or stigmatization faced by health workers during the COVID-19 pandemic and encourage workers to report such incidents promptly.

We hope that you will consider these recommendations.
Yours sincerely,

Omar Waraich
Head of Office, South Asia
Amnesty International
International Secretariat

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[5] See Pandemic Panic in Pakistan: People Are Literally Fighting for Beds, *NPR*, 19 June 2020
https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/06/19/878896370/pandemic-panic-in-pakistan-people-are-just-literally-fighting-for-beds

[6] See Attendants of Deceased Patient Attack Doctor at Peshawar Hospital, *Samaa News,* 19 June 2020
https://www.samaa.tv/news/2020/06/attendants-of-deceased-patient-attack-doctor-at-peshawar-hospital/

[7] See Pandemic Panic in Pakistan: People Are Literally Fighting for Beds, *NPR*, 19 June 2020
https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/06/19/878896370/pandemic-panic-in-pakistan-people-are-just-literally-fighting-for-beds

[8] See Pakistan Hospitals Struggle As Corona Virus Cases Explode, *Al Jazeera,* 12 June 2020 https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/pakistan-hospitals-struggle-coronavirus-cases-explode-200612084123797.html