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To,

Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus
Director-General
World Health Organization

Date: 26th July, 2021

Dear Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus,

We, the undersigned civil society organizations, health practitioners, academics, women's rights organizations, and other concerned individuals, are deeply concerned at arrest by the Israeli Army of Ms. Shatha Odeh, the Director of the Health Work Committees (HWC), one of Palestine's major non-governmental health care provider organizations, at her home in Ramallah on 7th July, 2021.

Ms. Odeh is a well-respected civil society leader both locally and internationally. She is the chairperson of the Palestinian NGO Network (PNGO), a network of most Palestinian NGOs, and a member of the Global Steering Council of the People's Health Movement (PHM). She is a dedicated healthcare professional who, as director of HWC, has been essential in organizing healthcare services, including sexual and reproductive health and mental health services, to over 400,000 beneficiaries throughout the West Bank. The HWC is in the frontline of COVID-19 pandemic response through its community-based services, hospital services, mobile clinics and community outreach programmes. The attack on HWC further aggravates the current health situation, in particular the situation of women and children and vulnerable groups such as those with special needs. Any attack on its functioning is a threat to the health and well-being of the Palestinian people.

Ms. Odeh, a 60-year-old mother of three children, was forcibly and arbitrarily removed from her house in Ramallah, Palestine, and is now being held in a prison where access to visits from relatives is effectively denied, access to her essential medication and to legal support is restricted and where she is reportedly now under harsh and prolonged interrogation. We express our shock at the terms of incarceration of a leading regional and international defender of women's rights and health rights. These are inhuman and a violation of fundamental human rights. We call on the international community and women's rights and human rights defenders around the world to help us call for justice and freedom for Ms. Odeh.

Ms. Odeh's arrest comes one month after an Israeli military raid on the offices of the HWC and an order to close its headquarters for six months. This attack on the work of the HWC was widely condemned, including by the People's Health Movement and by Amnesty International, which



highlighted the “catastrophic consequences for the health needs of Palestinians across the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT).” As they face a fourth wave of COVID-19, the military attacks on HWC further weaken the Palestinians’ ability to cope with the pandemic. And yet, as the Occupying Power, Israel is responsible for ensuring that Palestinians’ health rights are fulfilled.

The closure of the HWCs and arrest of Ms. Odeh come in a context of increasing criminalisation of Palestinian civil society organisations by the Israeli occupation forces. In January 2019, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights pointed out that Israeli “legislation, both adopted and proposed, singles out human rights organizations for increased restrictions. Administrative constraints are placed on their operations. Sources of funding are undermined through campaigns to delegitimize organizations working for the rights of Palestinians. Human rights defenders are arrested and threatened, and groups including Israeli organisations as well as foreign Jewish organizations are being targeted for standing up for Palestinians’ human rights”.

We, the undersigned, condemn the arrest of Ms. Odeh and call for her immediate release. We urge the Israeli Government to fulfil its obligations to ensure full public health and medical care provision in the Occupied Palestinian Territories including through full recognition and support for Palestinian civil society health care providers.

As part of its mandate on international health work, in the defence of health and rights and as a humanitarian response, we call on the WHO to intercede with global and national authorities including through the offices of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Secretary-General, to secure the immediate release of Ms. Shatha Odeh, and ensure that the services provided by HWC are restored, and the attacks on Palestinian healthcare workers and human rights activists and civil society organizations cease immediately.

Yours sincerely,

Fran Baum

Sulakshana Nandi

Co-chairs, Global Steering Council, People’s Health Movement (PHM)

This letter has also been signed by 130 organizations from 41 countries and 590 individuals from 60 countries. List of the other signatories is enclosed in the Annexure.

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