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### 66th Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights

#### Agenda Item 3: Human rights situation in Africa (with special focus on human and peoples' rights and COVID-19)

Honourable Chairperson,

Amnesty International welcomes this opportunity to address the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Commission) on this occasion of its 66th ordinary session.

In Africa, as elsewhere, health workers have played an extraordinary role in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. They have risked their health, wellbeing and lives to ensure that people are able to access health care. In turn, there has been an unprecedented outpouring of public support and solidarity in many countries. However, governments are not adequately protecting them.

Our recently published global research into the rights of health and essential workers covers 21 African countries. It reveals a common pattern: many health workers are performing their jobs without adequate protection and in unsafe environments. In some cases, they have not received fair remuneration and compensation, despite the fact they are experiencing high workloads. When they have tried to speak out about these concerns, some have faced repression from the state.

This statement highlights the repression of health workers in two countries: Egypt and Zimbabwe.

In **Egypt**, authorities have used vague and overly broad charges of "spreading false news" and "terrorism" to arbitrarily arrest and detain health care workers who speak out and have subjected them to threats, harassment and punitive administrative measures. Nine health care workers, including seven doctors and two pharmacists, were arbitrarily detained between March and June by the National Security Agency (NSA) for expressing their health-related concerns including in social media posts. Amnesty International calls on the African Commission to urge Egyptian authorities to ensure that all health and essential workers are able exercise their right to freedom of expression without fear of reprisals.

In **Zimbabwe**, charges have been levelled against 13 nurses who are accused of contravening lockdown regulations by protesting to demand better wages and working conditions. The nurses were arrested on 6 July at Sally Mugabe Hospital as they were planning to have a feedback meeting on their current labour dispute with their employer. Two of them paid admission of guilt fines whilst 11 were released on \$15 bail after they appeared at a magistrate court on 7 July. Amnesty International calls on the African Commission to urge Zimbabwean authorities to immediately and unconditionally drop the charges against the nurses and to stop intimidating, harassing and suppressing dissent and instead start listening to the genuine concerns of health care workers.



The challenges that health workers in Africa face today are symptoms of broader structural issues with health care and social support systems, which have been brought into sharp focus as a result of the pandemic. There has been significant under-investment in and under-prioritization of health and social care systems across Africa, even though in 2001 states pledged in the Abuja Declaration to allocate at least 15% of their national budgets to the health care sector.

Amnesty International calls on the African Commission to urge African states to increase budgetary allocations to the public health sector and develop a plan to ensure that the public health system is adequately funded and staffed. This should include a detailed assessment of the amount of public health spending necessary to ensure that all persons can enjoy the right to health, and options to finance increased public health spending.

Thank you.