

Hundreds of organizations and individuals call for release of Palestinian health activist

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Shatha Odeh, director of the Health Work Committees (HWC) in the occupied West Bank city of Ramallah.

Ramallah, July 30 (RHC)-- Hundreds of rights organizations and human rights advocates have called on the United Nations to intervene for the immediate release of a prominent Palestinian health activist from a prison in the occupied West Bank city of Ramallah.

In a petition signed on Thursday, nearly 130 organizations from 41 countries and about 590 individuals from 60 countries urged the World Health Organization (WHO) and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to step forward for the immediate release of Shatha Odeh, director of the the Health Work Committees (HWC) in Ramallah.

Odeh, a 60-year-old health and human rights defender, was arrested at her home in al-Bireh city near Ramallah earlier in the month after she had defied an Israeli military order shutting down her HWC office for six months over her activism in the occupied Palestinian territories.

"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," said the petition.

The petition described Odeh as "a well-respected civil society leader both locally and internationally," noting, she is a dedicated healthcare professional who, as director of HWC, has been "essential in organizing healthcare 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 programs," it added. The signatories underlined that 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."

Odeh is currently being held in a prison in Ramallah 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 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," the petitioners stressed.

The attack on Odeh's HWC and her arrest were widely condemned by human rights groups. The petition further said the closure of the HWC and arrest of Odeh come in a context of "increasing criminalization of Palestinian civil society organizations by the Israeli occupation forces," warning that "sources of funding are undermined through campaigns to delegitimize organizations working for the rights of Palestinians."

"We, the undersigned, condemn the arrest of Ms. Odeh and call for her immediate release," the petition added, calling on 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."

Palestinian sources say over 7,000 Palestinians are currently detained in Israeli jails, mostly with no charge. The Palestinian resistance has warned that they will not remain silent and will hold Israel responsible for the consequences of neglecting the health condition of Palestinian prisoners.

In recent months and in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, several Palestinian prisoners have been infected in Israeli detention centers amid mounting concerns about medical negligence by authorities.



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