Reports say at least 17,000 health workers have died from COVID

London, March 5 (RHC)-- At least 17,000 health workers have died worldwide from COVID-19 over the last year, Amnesty International has said, while also calling for a rapid vaccine release to protect millions of front-line healthcare workers.

The analysis from Amnesty, Public Services International (PSI) and UNI Global Union, released on Friday, comes as global inequalities in vaccine access continue to widen.

Amnesty said the 17,000 deaths from COVID-19, which amounted to a health worker dying every 30 minutes, was a "tragedy and an injustice." "This is certainly a significant underestimate because there is a degree of under-reporting in a lot of countries," said Steve Cockburn, the head of economic and social justice at Amnesty International.

The report was based on available data published by governments, unions, media, and civil society organisations in more than 70 countries. According to Amnesty, as of figures compiled by Friday, at least

3,507 healthcare workers died from COVID-19 in the United States, with the number at 3,371 in Mexico, 1,143 in Brazil, 1,131 in Russia, and 931 in the United Kingdom.

Unsafe working conditions and a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) have been some of the main issues faced by health workers worldwide throughout the pandemic, especially in the early phases.

Cockburn said that that the beginning of the pandemic there was a shortage of PPE in almost every country at a time when many health systems were "completely overwhelmed" and understaffed, with health workers often working long shifts without proper infection control.

"That problem in many countries still remains, and in certain countries that have got a lot better … but the health workers are still highly exposed to infections … and there are many types of health workers who are often excluded or neglected from this sort of protection," he said.

A report by Amnesty International in July 2020 had found shortages of PEE in nearly all of the 63 countries it surveyed. In these countries which include Malaysia, Mexico and the United States, cleaners, and auxiliary staff faced reprisals such as dismissal and arrest after demanding PPE and better working conditions.

Amnesty also said that more than half the world's COVID-19 vaccine doses have so far been administered in just 10 rich countries, while not a single health worker has received a vaccine in more than 100 countries.

The human rights group called on governments to include all front-line workers in their vaccine distribution plans as many poorer countries are expected to receive their first batches in the coming weeks and months.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), most African countries are expected to start their vaccination drives by the end of March. This has been done with the help of COVAX, a vaccine-sharing initiative aimed at reducing vaccine disparity between high- and low-income countries.

However, Amnesty warned that in some countries health workers are at risk of missing out on being prioritised, either because of a lack of supply, problems in implementation or narrow definitions of what constitutes a health worker.

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