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I am writing from my home in Ottawa where I am in self-isolation having recently returned from the US. As you know, I am the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, and I am writing to you in this capacity.

What Canada and the world are facing with the spread of the COVID19 virus is unprecedented and bewildering. There is little doubt that it will create real harm for many in our society. If, however, we are thoughtful and compassionate and true to human rights values in our decision making, it might also present an opportunity to create a Canada that even better protects marginalized and disadvantaged communities.

I have been monitoring government responses to the COVID19 for several weeks now. Your government's commitment to social protection deserves particular commendation. I urge you to continue to be bold in that regard.

Like most governments, the prescription you have suggested to protect against the coronavirus infection and flatten the pandemic curve, is to "stay home". I applaud your efforts towards this objective, such as the announcement of a substantial increase in funds to address homelessness – and particularly women's experiences of homelessness – as well as the deferral of mortgage payments for those affected by the virus.

While we are all rightly grappling to address the immediate medical, health, employment, food and housing (etc.) needs that the CV19 pandemic raises, there are also measures that must be taken now to ensure that when Canada emerges from the pandemic its population is healthy and strong. As we know, adequate, secure and affordable housing plays a foundational role in the health of a nation. (This virus is testament to that, if nothing else). You are clearly taking steps with this in mind. I note, for example, the lowering of interest rates, and the allocation of \$50-billion toward the purchasing by CMHC of mortgages to help stabilize banks and ensure their liquidity – a measure that was also taken after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis.

There is more to do, however. Those living in rental accommodation – comprising the lowest income people in the country – require greater housing security at a time of great insecurity. While a few jurisdictions in Canada have taken measures to stop evictions due to rent arrears, greater protections are required.

Those living in homelessness need better protections as well. Homelessness services across Canada are frantically trying to prepare for the COVID19, despite lacking the physical infrastructure, equipment, and human resources to enable the social distancing and quarantine needed to limit the spread of the virus. The 157 million dollar investment today will contribute to these important emergency efforts, and these funds must flow immediately.

However, it is essential that the groundwork for permanent housing solutions be laid now. When the pandemic subsides, this population will need a permanent place to live. It would be a public disaster if, after the pandemic, those temporarily housed had no other option but to return to living in homelessness and continue to face the myriad of disease and threats to their life and security. This would be newly understood as an unacceptable inequality.

The pandemic has shown us the importance of home like never before. In the face of this crisis, the Government of Canada has the incredible opportunity to eliminate homelessness. To do this, however, will require you to urgently take bold steps.

Among other feasible measures, it will require you to start purchasing properties to develop the social infrastructure necessary to ensure no one is without a home in this country.

The pandemic and associated economic downturn will result in distressed assets such as hotels, motels, apartment buildings, condominiums and incomplete housing projects. You need to ensure that these assets are not purchased by private equity firms and other institutional buyers who have a tremendous amount of capital at their disposal, and who prey on cheap debt that they can turn into large profits. They are already poised to do so. The CEO of Blackstone Group, Steve Schwarzman recently [said](#): “Every day, it is becoming a better day to buy assets with people experiencing unexpected difficulties” as the virus spreads.

The pandemic is already having dire consequences. People are dying and living in fear. Those with little already have less. As Government you must ask – how do you want the country to emerge from the crisis? Who should be the winners?

You have the opportunity to turn the most significant calamity the world has witnessed in recent history, into social progress. We are in an unprecedented moment to correct the structural weaknesses in our housing system and turn this catastrophe into social good and the implementation of human rights, in keeping with the Government’s housing policy.

I offer 6 concrete measures that could be taken in this regard:

- 1. A nation-wide end to all evictions and foreclosures in all circumstances during the pandemic and for a reasonable time thereafter.**
- 2. A nation-wide prohibition on the termination of electricity, heat, water, telephone and internet services during the pandemic.**
- 3. A nation-wide restriction on all rent increases during the pandemic and for a reasonable time thereafter.**
- 4. Nation-wide rent relief where tenants are unable to pay rent, even with income supports and benefits provided by the government, during the pandemic and for a reasonable time thereafter.**
- 5. Purchase, lease or otherwise secure vacant units that are available to rent (short or long term) and/or that are for sale, including motels, and hotels. These units can be used as emergency shelter spaces in order to provide immediate housing for those in need. Community based organizations could be made responsible for developing priority lists and for allocations and ensuring necessary supports are in place. (This may require investment in expanding staffing capacities).**

**These units would be made available to those living in homelessness, including those exhibiting symptoms who need to self-isolate, or who have had contact with individuals who have COVID19 or have exhibited symptoms of the virus. Some of these assets might, over time, be re-purposed for long-term housing.**

- 6. Purchase distressed and other housing assets to enhance the Government's supply of public housing assets. Those living in emergency shelter spaces could be moved into these units over time**

**and as appropriate with the assistance of community based social service and housing providers.**

**To facilitate this, the Government may have to introduce restrictions on the ability of institutional investors to engage in predatory purchases. The pandemic has already required the GOC to introduce a number of restrictions governing behaviour to ensure the best interests of the overall population – restrictions on institutional purchases of residential property are of a similar nature.**

I recognize that some of these suggestions may fall within provincial/territorial jurisdiction. But national level leadership is desperately needed now. Community based housing actors are struggling. You can avail yourself of a number of legal mechanisms, including the Emergencies Act, that will permit the GOC to take such actions. I cannot think of a more important time for the GOC to demonstrate calm leadership in this regard.

I would be happy to discuss these measures with you at any time. Moreover, I offer my unconditional support and assistance should that be of use to you in these exceptional circumstances.

Very sincerely,



Leilani Farha

**UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing**