



8 February 2021 - In 2020, the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean conducted a 3-month mission to Syria to provide technical support to the WHO country office and the Ministry of Health for their response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and to follow up on the implementation of recommendations from previous missions and support the Ministry to re-activate influenza-like illness (ILI) and severe acute respiratory infection (SARI) sentinel sites, and establish new SARI sentinel sites.

The mission, which took place from 7 August to 14 October 2020, also provided support to modify the COVID-19 case definition, revise the national testing strategy, and update case reporting for the COVID-19 surveillance system.

Field visits

Several field visits were undertaken by the mission to learn more about existing gaps and identify where help could be best provided. This included a field visit to the Qamishli hub in northeast Syria from 12 to 24 September 2020, during which it was possible to assess the capacity of Qamishli National Hospital to deal with COVID-19 cases and identify the major needs. Al-Hol camp was also visited to conduct an in-depth assessment of COVID-19 surveillance and case management in the camp, with a focus on the role of the rapid response teams and contact tracing.

Training

Training workshops were also held during the mission, including a 1-day workshop for 14 focal points of the Early Warning, Alert and Response System (EWARS) to enhance their knowledge and skills in detecting alerts and on investigation, reporting and response procedures. Another training workshop was held on field investigation and rapid response to suspected outbreaks, to strengthen the capacity of the rapid response teams. The overall goal of the training was to ensure a prompt and effective response to public health hazards, with a focus on the COVID-19 pandemic, and to reduce morbidity and mortality to a minimum.

Influenza surveillance



The mission also aimed to reactivate and enhance the influenza surveillance system in Syria, which had been impacted by the heavy demands of the COVID-19 pandemic. A technical visit was made to Ibn Al-Nafees General Hospital in Damascus, which was assessed to have met the required criteria to become a SARI sentinel site. Technical visits were also conducted to the national influenza centre for a better understanding of its existing capacities and gaps.

As a result of these activities, the influenza surveillance system was reactivated by the beginning of October 2020. A first round of influenza testing was then conducted, and the data shared through global and regional platforms.

Previous COVID-19 review mission

To support Syria in scaling up its operational readiness and response to the COVID-19 pandemic and to prevent further disease transmission, a WHO team from the Regional Office conducted a review mission from 7 to 12 July 2020 to rapidly assess the core elements of the pandemic response and provide guidance as needed.

The mission acknowledged the efforts made by the Ministry of Health, amidst difficult circumstances, and reaffirmed WHO's commitment to providing the Ministry with technical guidance relevant to the country's situation and needs.

A number of recommendations were made regarding WHO support for updating technical guidance and implementing it in the field through the deployment of hands-on expertise, strengthening risk communication and community engagement, supporting research activities and providing the needed supplies and reagents together with its partners (United Nations and others).

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