

3 September 2020 – Our Region is close to approaching a new grim milestone of 2 million COVID-19 cases: as of 1 September, the cumulative number of cases in the Region is now more than 1 936 221, with 51 326 deaths.

Of greatest concern is a new upsurge in cases in a number of countries, highlighting the negative consequences of lack of adherence to public health measures.

In Lebanon, adherence to public health measures was adversely affected after the devastating explosion in Beirut, which also overburdened an already overstretched health system and health workforce. WHO is actively strengthening surveillance and expanding contact tracing by providing human resources, strengthening airport screening by providing nursing resources and actively supporting increased laboratory capacity.

Religious and cultural mass gatherings, wedding celebrations and other social events, have contributed to the upsurge of cases in different countries of the Region.

In Tunisia, the vast majority of recent infections were linked to ceremonies and gatherings for marriages, and in public places where control measures were not applied. In response, the government has suspended all mass gathering ceremonies in high-risk areas. The Ministry of Health has also now enforced the wearing of face masks in public places and on public transport.

Similarly in Jordan, the upsurge was linked to wedding celebrations and religious gatherings. The country responded swiftly by reintroducing strict public health measures, such as extending curfew hours and closing 2 cities (Amman and Zarqa). Testing capacity has also been increased.

In Libya, the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 over the past 2 weeks has more than doubled. Given the acute shortages of tests and laboratory capacity, the real number of cases is likely to be much higher. WHO is supporting the efforts of Libyan authorities to increase the number of COVID-19 tests, trace contacts, reinforce isolation of positive cases, manage moderate and more severely ill patients and work closely with partners to destigmatize

COVID-19 and explain that the virus can affect anyone, anywhere.

Countries or communities that observed religious rituals of *Ashura* have implemented various public health measures and restrictions to prevent the spread of COVID-19, including providing sanitizers, promoting respiratory etiquettes, enforcing obligatory wearing of face masks and physical distancing measures, limiting capacity of religious venues to 50%, and in some cases, banning public participation in mass gatherings and outdoor rallies.

At a regional level, the incident management support team for COVID-19 has formed a special taskforce to work closely with Member States experiencing an upsurge to provide technical and logistical support, and exchange information and lessons learned among these and other countries of the Region.

As educational facilities reopen over the next few weeks across the Region, the risk of increased transmission continues to grow. As such, it is important to engage students, teachers, other staff, parents, guardians, and community members in promoting safe and healthy schools.

The Regional Office has developed guidelines on the safe return to schools with recommended actions including: staying home when sick; covering mouth and nose with flexed elbow or tissue when coughing or sneezing; washing hands often with soap and water, or using an alcohol-based rub; cleaning frequently touched surfaces and objects; keeping a distance of at least 1 metre from others; and wearing a mask if mandated or when physical distancing is not possible; and greeting people with a wave, nod or hand on the heart.

These actions are important to prevent the potential spread of COVID-19 inside and outside education settings. Equally as important is to avoid stigmatizing anyone who may have been exposed to the virus.

And as the search for a safe and effective vaccine for COVID-19 continues, we must also remember that there are other tools and weapons we have in hand that can help us fight the pandemic, reduce cases and save more lives.

Today, I would like to call upon every one everywhere in our Region, including teachers, parents, caregivers, health workers and many others, to remain vigilant and exert greater effort in protecting themselves at schools and educational settings, work settings, at home or indoor places.

We can only beat this virus together by remaining committed and staying alert.

Stay safe!

*Delivered by Dr Rana Hajjeh, Director of Programme Management, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean*

Wednesday 1st of May 2024 06:59:26 AM