

24 June 2021 – I would like to welcome you all to this virtual media briefing on the COVID-19 situation in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. We are glad to have with us today, Dr Hany Jokhdar, Deputy Minister of Health of Saudi Arabia, and Dr Ibrahim El-Ziq, WHO Representative in Saudi Arabia, to discuss the preparations for this year's hajj season.

Let me start with the latest updates on COVID-19.

As of 22 June 2021, there have been around 179 million confirmed cases of COVID-19, including more than 3.9 million deaths, reported globally to WHO. The Eastern Mediterranean Region has reported around 10.8 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and around 213 500 deaths.

The number of cases is declining for the tenth week in a row, with the number of deaths stabilizing or declining slightly. While this is good news, 6 countries in the Region reported an increase in new cases last week, compared to the previous week. The case increase in Oman and Yemen exceeded 20%, and Afghanistan, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen have reported a more than 20% increase in the number of deaths.

We believe there are several reasons for these increases, including the spread of variants of concern, lack of adherence to preventative measures, and vaccine inequity, which, along with vaccine hesitancy, is being witnessed globally and across our Region.

As of 21 June, 2.4 billion vaccine doses had been administered globally, of which approximately 83 million were administered in the Region, covering only 11 doses per 100 people (as of 20 June). While a handful of countries have high vaccination rates, 8 of our 22 countries have vaccinated less than 1% of their population.

The Region still needs over 400 million doses to vaccinate priority groups – who make up 40% of the Region's population – by the end of the year. If countries immediately share doses with the COVAX Facility and if manufacturers prioritize COVAX orders, we will be in a better position to achieve WHO's targets to vaccinate at least 10% of the population of every country by September, and at least 40% by the end of the year.

WHO is continuing to provide support to boost vaccine production in the Region to overcome the shortfall in vaccination rates. We welcome the advancements and technology transfer agreements made by vaccine production companies in Egypt, Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan and United Arab Emirates and anticipate potential ventures by Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia.

Additionally, the COVAX Facility is playing an effective role in delivering vaccines to ensure the fastest, most equitable rollout of safe and effective vaccines to all. As of 8 June, the COVAX Facility has shipped over 90 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines to 131 countries, including to 21 countries in our Region. More doses will be made available through COVAX this month to countries of the Region, especially to those countries that have so far not received quantities sufficient to their needs.

Variants of concern continue to circulate across the Region. To date, 17 countries have officially reported detection of the VOC Alpha, 11 countries have reported the VOC Beta, 3 countries have reported the detection of the VOC Gamma, and 7 countries have reported the VOC Delta. We continue to observe how vaccine efficacy is affected by these new variants, but so far, vaccines are still proving effective against all new variants.

As we approach the hajj season and Eid Al-Adha, I would like to remind us all of the importance of maintaining effective personal protective measures as we observe religious practices and festivities. We welcome the decision of Saudi Arabia to limit registration for this year's hajj to 60 000 pilgrims to ensure compliance with COVID-19 preventive and safety measures.

WHO is preparing guidelines on protective measures to be taken by individuals during the hajj season and Eid al-Adha and these will be made available shortly.

This Eid al-Adha let us make sure that no one is harmed because of their own complacency or the complacency of others and let us celebrate Eid al-Adha safely this year.

We can remain socially connected but we must adhere to physical distancing measures by avoiding physical greetings, social feasts, and other social gatherings as much as possible.

Some of the simplest measures can have huge consequences for our joint efforts in fighting and containing the pandemic.

Thank you

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