

1 April 2021 – I would like to welcome you all today to this press briefing, and also I would like to give a warm welcome to my colleague Ted Chaiban, UNICEF Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa. WHO and UNICEF have a long history of working hand in hand to address some of the most urgent issues related to the health and well-being of all people in our Region.

This solid partnership is at its strongest now during the COVID-19 pandemic, when we are facing a global threat that requires even more coordinated efforts. I am proud that our teams – together with many other partners – are on the ground leading the response to COVID-19, even in some of the most challenging settings.

It saddens me to report that we continue to see a worrying trend in the number cases across the Eastern Mediterranean Region – which as you know, covers 22 countries and territory from Morocco in the west to Afghanistan in the east.

Fourteen countries this week reported a significant increase in weekly cases in comparison with the previous week. Jordan, Islamic Republic of Iran and Iraq reported the highest number of new cases, and Jordan, Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan reported the highest number of new deaths.

There are several factors that could be associated with this increase of new cases. Some of this increase can be accounted for by the increased circulation of the variants of concern, which we are monitoring closely.

But more importantly, and despite countries' efforts to enforce various public health and social measures, we see people not adhering to those measures, which include physical distancing, wearing a face mask, hand hygiene, cleaning of hands, respiratory etiquette, avoiding crowded spaces, and opening windows.

We know very well that people everywhere are tired, exhausted and there is huge demand and pressure on everyone, including political leaders everywhere, to navigate our way out of this pandemic. But the reality is, the situation is not getting any better, and the trend we are seeing

across many countries is worrying.

With Ramadan and Easter coming up across the Region, there is a danger that we will continue to see even more increases in cases and deaths, as we did at the end of last year over the holiday period when people socialized more without respecting the public health advice. While we understand that these are important holidays worth celebrating, we urge you all to please continue to protect yourselves and others. And we urge all governments to provide the needed support that has shown its benefit over the last year.

Over the past few months, we have seen the gradual roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines in our Region, both through countries making agreements directly with vaccine manufacturers, and through the delivery of vaccines via the COVAX Facility.

To date, 20 countries are vaccinating their populations and more than 23 million doses have been administered so far. 12 countries in the Region have already received vaccines through the COVAX Facility, most recently Egypt and Yemen, who received their first shipments via COVAX just yesterday. While COVAX shipments may not have been the first to arrive to countries, they have been instrumental for those that could not have started vaccinations otherwise.

The global shortage of vaccines has led to delays in securing tens of millions of doses that COVAX was counting on, and we are still concerned about vaccine inequity and uneven distribution across our Region. However, there are many high-income countries both in our Region and around the world that have secured a large number of doses that goes beyond their own needs.

I would like to call on those countries who can share some of these doses so that everyone – especially in countries with limited resources in our region – has access to these scarce resources.

COVAX is ready to deliver but we can not deliver vaccines we do not have. We are competing with high-income countries procuring millions of doses directly from the manufacturers. In this situation, nobody wins. We need to get more vaccine doses into the COVAX Facility, so that we can ensure that all countries can vaccinate at least the priority groups before World Health Day,

which is the 100th day of the year, as stressed by WHO's Director-General. There are now just 7 days left.

In order to maximize the impact of the limited supply of vaccines currently available for the initial phase, the priority is to protect health care workers and those at highest risk of severe disease: this is the best approach to address the immediate societal and economic impacts of COVID-19.

Ensuring the quality, safety and efficacy of vaccines is one of WHO's highest priorities. The process to develop COVID-19 vaccines is being fast-tracked while maintaining the highest standards, and WHO follows the same rigorous approval process for COVID-19 vaccines as it does for any other vaccine.

We are concerned about levels of vaccine hesitancy in the Region and want to work with the media and others involved to build the trust that will strengthen vaccine confidence. I call on all health care workers in the Region who benefited and were protected by these vaccines to share their experience and encourage others to be vaccinated.

We are very excited and hopeful about the potential impact of vaccines on the course of the pandemic. However, I need to stress again that we cannot rely on vaccines alone to end this pandemic. Many people in the community are not yet vaccinated and not protected against disease. We need to continue taking measures to avoid transmission.

More than one year into the pandemic, we have seen an unparalleled mobilization of science, a search for solutions and a commitment to global solidarity. Acts of generosity, large and small, have helped to scale up the response, protect populations, and equip hospitals with the tools that health workers need to stay safe and care for their patients. Historic efforts have been made to accelerate the process of vaccine production and roll out.

To end this pandemic, we have to keep working together. Our main purpose is to save lives, but controlling the pandemic is also crucial to the economic needs of the people, and to saving livelihoods.

We are starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel, but we still have a long way to go. And we must keep moving forward, together. We count on you, the media and the public, to play a key role in helping us succeed.

Thank you.

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