

14 April 2021 - Thank you for joining us again here today, and Ramadan Kareem to all those who are marking this holy month.

As mentioned by WHO's Director General a few days ago, globally we have now seen seven consecutive weeks of increasing cases, and four weeks of increasing deaths.

Across the Eastern Mediterranean Region, 12 out of 22 countries reported an increase in cases last week compared to the week before, and 11 countries reported an increase in deaths.

Overall, the number of new cases and deaths in the Region increased by 22% and 17% respectively last week compared to the week before. This means that in the last week alone, more than 364,113 people were infected with COVID-19, and 4,415 people tragically died.

This increase in cases reflects a worrying trend – that many people across the Region are still are not realizing the gravity of the situation, or adhering to the preventive measures that we know work to stop transmission. I would like to stress here that the measures that we have been calling for again and again can save your life, or the life of someone you love.

And we are especially worried that the current situation may worsen during Ramadan if people don't follow and adhere to the proven social measures that work.

This year, like last year, people may feel that the spirit of Ramadan has changed because of social distancing and lockdowns.

But the actions that need to be maintained to help contain the pandemic are in line with the basic tenets of Islam: take care of your physical health and do no harm to others.

To protect ourselves, and prevent transmission of the disease to others, we need to strictly

follow the public health and social measures that we know work to stop infection and save lives: physical distancing, mask use, hand hygiene, ventilation works, surveillance, testing, contact tracing, isolation, and quarantine.

The actions we take as governments and as individuals over the coming weeks will define the course of the pandemic in the coming months.

We now have all the tools at our disposal to contain COVID-19. It is our responsibility to use these tools responsibly and consistently, taking a coordinated and comprehensive approach.

Vaccines are a key tool that is now available in every country of the Region. Overall, 21 out of 22 countries have commenced vaccination, with more than 30 million doses of COVID-19 have been administered so far across the Region.

Recently, WHO's Global Advisory Committee on Vaccine Safety reviewed available information on the AstraZeneca vaccine and said that a causal relationship between the vaccine and the occurrence of blood clots with low platelets is plausible, but more investigation is required.

WHO continues to recommend that the benefits of the vaccine outweigh the risk of these very rare side effects.

I would like to highlight here that all vaccines and medicines carry a risk of side effects. However, in this case, the risks of severe disease and death from COVID-19 are higher than the very small side effects related to getting the vaccine.

I urge everyone to refer to WHO and their national health authorities as primary sources of information on vaccines, and to avoid sharing or listening to inaccurate or misleading information.

Although progress has been made with starting vaccination around the world, there remains a

shocking imbalance in the distribution of vaccines.

This is especially true in our Region, where health care workers and people living in some of the most vulnerable settings, such as Syria and Yemen, have the most limited access to vaccines.

Building on the Regional solidarity we have seen since the beginning of the pandemic, I urge all wealthy countries to support their neighbors through the delivery of vaccines, either directly, or through financial support to the COVAX Facility.

Every action taken by one country, by one leader, by every individual, has determined the course of the pandemic so far.

It's time for every one of us to take a step back and reflect on how we can do more, and do better, to help build a healthier, safer, and fairer world.

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