

20 May 2021 – A warm welcome from WHO's Regional Office in Cairo and thank you for joining us today.

Over the past 10 days, the escalation of violence in the occupied Palestinian territory has resulted in a substantial number of fatalities and casualties, as well as significant damage to many health facilities.

WHO is extremely concerned about the loss of many lives; as of 19 May, 245 people have died, including 67 children, and 6700 people have been injured in the occupied Palestinian territory. The violence has also caused significant damage to multiple health facilities in the Gaza Strip. This includes the almost total destruction of Hala Al Shawa primary care clinic and substantial damage to the central testing laboratory for COVID-19 at Rimal clinic in Gaza City. The latter incident resulted in the severe injury of a doctor who was on duty at the time, who is currently in an intensive care unit.

In the Gaza Strip, the severity of injuries is straining an already overwhelmed health system that is facing critical shortages of essential medicines and supplies while also battling the COVID-19 pandemic. Closure of entry and exit points for patients and humanitarian health teams, and severe restrictions on the entry of medical supplies, is exacerbating this public health crisis.

In the West Bank, there has been obstruction of medical teams to accessing casualties, beating, and injuring of health care workers, damage, detention and confiscation of ambulances, and incursion into health facilities.

Health care staff working under already challenging conditions and with limited resources should not have to live in fear of these attacks. The populations they serve cannot afford to be deprived of essential health services so badly needed at this time.

Attacks against health care facilities and staff should be a red line for any conflict; they should not be targets – nor should they be impacted by so-called “collateral damage”. WHO calls for the immediate cessation of hostilities and an end to attacks that either directly or indirectly impact health care in the occupied Palestinian territory.

WHO also calls for the urgent facilitation of humanitarian access to the Gaza Strip to allow entry of essential medical supplies, referral of patients to facilities outside the Gaza Strip, and passage of medical teams and humanitarian personnel.

WHO is working to support the Palestinian health system in its emergency humanitarian response, and we call for the support of the international community in these efforts. I would like to welcome my colleague Dr Rik Peepkorn, who heads WHO's office for the occupied Palestinian territory (the West Bank and Gaza Strip) and will update us today on the evolving situation and WHO's response.

But before I hand over to Rik, let me provide a brief update on COVID-19 in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

As of 17 May 2021, the Eastern Mediterranean Region has reported more than 9.7 million cases and 195 000 deaths. While some countries are reporting a decline in cases and deaths, the virus continues to infect and kill more people every day across the Region. In the coming weeks, we will soon reach the worrying milestone of 10 million cases since the start of the pandemic.

New variants of concern or variants of interest are circulating in many countries in the Region. It is imperative to improve genomic sequencing capacity in all countries so that we can identify these variants and monitor their changes over time.

Despite all efforts, we still need more coordination across the various sectors and more community engagement, as well as stricter adherence to public health and social measures.

Vaccination is one of the most effective tools available in the fight against this pandemic. But we still have a long way to go. Many countries in our Region have not yet received sufficient doses to vaccinate even the most vulnerable.

Across our Region, only 50 million doses have been administered, with huge disparities between countries. Some countries have vaccinated over 80% of their population, while others have vaccinated less than 1%. At least 300 million doses in total are needed to vaccinate the most vulnerable and high-risk groups who make up 20% of the population.

Hesitancy towards vaccines remains a source of concern, as does the misinformation and disinformation guiding that hesitancy.

WHO welcomes the recent news from several countries who will be donating vaccines to the COVAX Facility, and we call for urgent delivery of additional doses to countries in our Region. In the fight against this pandemic, we either win together or lose together.

Getting a vaccine is a safe and effective way for us to protect ourselves and our loved ones. Receiving the vaccine gives us an advantage over the virus. If we are exposed, we have a much lower risk of getting sick and of serious consequences of infection.

But even in countries where large numbers of the population have been vaccinated, the global pandemic is far from over. We urge everyone to take the vaccine when offered, but to also remember that until most people are vaccinated, the virus still has an opportunity to spread and even to mutate – many lives are still at stake.

Until we observe substantial progress in vaccination coverage, we must continue to observe the prevention measures that we know reduce disease spread – wearing masks, washing hands, physically distancing and avoiding social gatherings and crowds. Being vaccinated does not mean that we can throw caution to the wind. Relaxing public health interventions should be done cautiously and with careful attention and care paid to those who remain unvaccinated.

Thank you.

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