

It is a pleasure to be here in Muscat with you today and I would like to start by thanking Oman – and the Ministry of Health in particular – for generously hosting this third EMARIS Conference. This is the latest example of a longstanding collaboration between WHO and Oman which has also benefited many other programme areas such as patient safety, injury prevention, road safety, mental health, and many others.

This year's EMARIS Conference takes place at a critical time. Our Region faces multiple large-scale emergencies caused by conflict, major natural disasters, food insecurity, and numerous outbreaks.

Over 55 outbreaks were reported in the Region in 2022, compared with 31 major outbreaks in 2021 and 14 in 2020, of which many are due to respiratory pathogens. Response efforts were overstretched, and health systems were overwhelmed. In all, over 7 million reported cases and at least 1400 associated deaths resulted from these outbreaks last year.

While this conference is an excellent opportunity to take stock of progress, achievements, challenges, and lessons learned related specifically to acute respiratory infections in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, we must not lose sight of the overall context of health emergencies more generally.

In this challenging context, your collective efforts have borne fruit. We have seen remarkable progress in strengthening and enhancing systems to prevent, prepare for, detect, and respond to emerging respiratory diseases including COVID-19, influenza, Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) and others. This is manifested in the early detection of disease outbreaks, rapid deployment of resources and timely investment in laboratory capacities.

As part of this work, last year WHO developed a regional framework and operational plan to integrate the surveillance systems for influenza, SARS-CoV-2 and other respiratory viruses with epidemic and pandemic potential. As a result, many countries in the Region are now implementing integrated surveillance of influenza and other respiratory diseases. This is part of a broader agenda in the region to develop integrated disease surveillance, starting with all communicable diseases.

Additionally, and guided by the regional roadmap to increase the utilization and uptake of the seasonal influenza vaccine, WHO is supporting countries to introduce and expand their national influenza vaccination policies and strengthen their influenza vaccination programmes, thanks to our partners at the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, PIP Framework and Task Force for Global Health.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, another milestone in disease surveillance was achieved when 21 countries and territories in the Region developed domestic genome sequencing surveillance capacity. This offers benefits beyond COVID-19 detection as it also enables the continuous monitoring of pathogens and the analysis of their genetic similarities and differences.

WHO continues to support the improvement of sentinel surveillance for Severe Acute Respiratory Infection (SARI) and influenza-like illnesses (ILIs) in all countries in the Region; 21 of the 22 countries are currently implementing SARI and ILI surveillance with enhanced data collection and analysis attributes.

At WHO, we have made it one of our top regional priorities in humanitarian settings for 2023 to strengthen countries' capacities to prevent, detect and respond to disease outbreaks and other health emergencies, with a particular focus on research and evidence generation.

We cannot do this alone. Leveraging EMARIS 2023, I urge you to continue prioritizing the improvement of disease surveillance and early warning systems for the early detection of outbreaks.

In closing, let me stress the importance of solidarity and partnership among all stakeholders in tackling the complex and critical health challenges that have brought us here today. We must all work together to ensure Health for All by All and to promote a One Health approach.

I wish you all a very successful meeting and look forward to hearing your experiences, ideas, and latest research findings.

I thank you.

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