9 September 2020, Baghdad, Iraq – To strengthen referral services and ensure swift access to medical care for people in dire need, including COVID-19 patients in hard to reach areas, the World Health Organization (WHO) has delivered ten fully equipped ambulances to the Ministry of Health and Directorate of Health in Ninewa.

"The procurement of these ambulances is timely considering the rising number of COVID-19 cases in the country, particularly in Baghdad and Ninawa Governorates. Patients with complications resulting from COVID-19, pregnant mothers and other medical conditions in hard to reach areas can now access timely lifesaving medical care," said Dr Adham Ismail, WHO Representative for Iraq.

"This donation also comes as a response to requests from health authorities to upgrade referral structures that were heavily affected during the 5-year conflict in Iraq, leaving many remote districts with no or limited emergency health services and care. These ambulances are, therefore, a critical tool to ensure that people in such locations receive support and access to secondary health facilities," added Dr Ismail.

Early access to emergency medical care is a critical component in managing patients with major health complications, including women and children. WHO's priority of preventing avoidable loss of life and reducing further medical complications ensures that health challenges arising from manageable conditions like COVID-19, pregnancy-related complications, and other conditions are attended to on time when transported through the ambulances to health facilities.

With an additional burden of COVID-19, referral services for other emergency health conditions such as pregnant women, children, and men were gravely affected as the later became a huge challenge to the already struggling health system because of the conflict that destroyed and damaged hundreds of ambulances. Before COVID-19, people in hard to reach areas faced difficulties accessing referral services, including using privately rented vehicles without any medical assistance, long delays at the security checkpoints, and using out-of-pocket expenses.

The procurement of the ambulances was made possible with the generous funding from USAID/Office of Foreign Disaster (OFDA).

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