

Cairo 12 October 2020 □ The annual meeting of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean began on Monday, 12 October 2020 with a strong focus on the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Ministers and representatives from across the Region discussed the impact of the pandemic on health systems and society more generally, and the conference itself was impacted by the pandemic, with participants meeting virtually online rather than in person.

In his opening address, Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, sent his condolences to the victims, families and communities that have been hit hard in recent months. He paid tribute to health workers and others working on the front lines, some of whom have paid the ultimate price in protecting and serving their communities.

He noted that COVID-19 had highlighted the need for solidarity and cooperation between countries. Pandemic response efforts in the Region had been boosted by generous support from donors and countries totalling almost US\$ 400 million to date, but more was needed. The pandemic had exposed serious cracks and fundamental weaknesses in institutions, economies and health systems, not only in the Region, but globally, and there were potentially catastrophic economic consequences. Many countries in the Region are already facing political, economic and social instability, conflict, natural disasters, poverty and population displacement, and the pandemic is likely to push more than 34 million people into extreme poverty by the end of the year.

Speaking remotely to the 67th session, WHO's Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said that although most countries in the Region had not been among those worst affected by COVID-19, the social and economic consequences had been severe. He stressed the need for continued vigilance as the number of cases continued to rise, with most people globally remaining susceptible to infection. Healthy populations, universal health coverage and health security were inseparable and investment in health was now more important than ever. He warned countries that progress and hard-won gains in public health could easily be lost as the pandemic was compromising access to essential health services.

The Director-General reassured countries that international initiatives should help to ensure that if and when a safe and effective vaccine became available, it would be distributed equitably to

all countries in the Region and beyond. WHO and its partners are leading these efforts with the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator and the COVAX Facility. However, countries cannot simply wait for a vaccine and should focus on the public health measures to address the pandemic.

The Chair of last year's Regional Committee, His Excellency Dr Said Namaki, Minister of Health and Medical Education of the Islamic Republic of Iran, warned that people's access to essential health services was being compromised. He said the world was learning important lessons as a result of COVID-19, including the need for strong leadership, greater solidarity among people and countries, the use of evidence-based interventions and the establishment of a sound IT infrastructure to cope with new ways of working during the COVID-19 age. He praised WHO's global leadership role in supporting country efforts to eradicate and limit transmission of communicable diseases and improve public health.

Her Excellency Dr Hala Zayed, the Minister of Health and Population of Egypt, Chair of this year's Regional Committee, said that to defeat the virus a collective and collaborative response must be fostered among countries with technical support provided by WHO. She applauded the Organization's leadership in responding to the global health challenge and expressed her appreciation for the Regional Director's initiative in establishing a COVID-19 ministerial working group and facilitating the exchange of experiences and best practices among countries to address their common challenges.

Presenting his written report to the Regional Committee on the work of WHO in the Eastern Mediterranean Region in 2019, the Regional Director looked in more detail at the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications. He emphasized that although the pandemic had massively disrupted health systems, economies and societies, it could also be used as an opportunity for positive change. It had identified weaknesses in health systems that needed to be addressed, stimulated innovations such as telemedicine and increased support for investment in health. He emphasized that the regional vision of Health for All by All was more relevant than ever, since the pandemic had shown that a risk to one person was a risk to everyone.

Discussing the report, ministers of health and other representatives from Member States in the Region highlighted the challenges they face in responding to COVID-19, but also gave many examples of new approaches to tackle the pandemic and maintain essential health services. They highlighted the importance of working across sectors, ensuring Health in All Policies, and taking a whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach as well as solidarity within and between countries.

Member States also discussed their experiences as part of regional initiatives and international research efforts, and expressed a keen desire to learn lessons and rebuild better in the post-pandemic era.

Dr Al-Mandhari concluded the session by thanking all health care workers wherever they served and all those who working to advance public health goals.

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