14 November 2019, Casablanca, Morocco – The fifth meeting of the Eastern Mediterranean Acute Respiratory Infection Surveillance (EMARIS) network, organized by WHO and hosted by the Ministry of Health of Morocco, is taking place this week in Casablanca, Morocco, from 12 to 15 November. This year's meeting also coincides with the Second Scientific Conference on Acute Respiratory Infections. Participants of the meetings include representatives of ministries of health of the Region and partner agencies, in particular, the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, global and regional experts and researchers and WHO staff.

The EMARIS network constitutes a group of countries working together in the Region to strengthen and enhance influenza surveillance, improve the use of surveillance data to strengthen disease control programmes and conduct research related to influenza and other respiratory viruses. Both meetings will discuss progress and challenges in strengthening surveillance and response capacities for seasonal and pandemic influenza and other acute respiratory infections.

In his inaugural speech to the Conference, Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, noted that the last influenza pandemic of 2009 and other recent epidemics had served as a stark reminder that emerging respiratory infections remained a serious threat to public health in spite of significant advances in vaccines, antivirals, antibiotics, diagnostics and therapeutic techniques, and while it was impossible to predict when the next influenza pandemic may occur, effective preparedness could mitigate its impact.

He also highlighted the growing threat of zoonotic diseases with 70% of emerging human pathogens coming from animals; their emergence is unpredictable and can spread rapidly across the globe as animals are intensively reared, transported for trade and kept in close contact with other species and people in markets.

Since 2006, the WHO Regional Office has been collaborating with the Influenza Division International Program of the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other WHO collaborating centres to strengthen surveillance systems for influenza-like illness and severe acute respiratory infections in the Region.

The goal of this collaboration is to enable countries in the Region to collect quality

epidemiological and virological surveillance data on influenza and influenza-associated illnesses in a timely and reliable manner with the overarching goal of improving pandemic influenza preparedness. This collaborative effort has been coupled with strong monitoring mechanisms to assess the progress of influenza surveillance using an established set of indicators.

Speakers at the opening session praised the support provided to Member States through the Pandemic Influenza Preparedness (PIP) Framework, which brings together Member States, industry, other stakeholders and WHO to implement a global approach to pandemic influenza preparedness and response. Its key goals include improving and strengthening the sharing of information on influenza viruses with human pandemic potential and increasing the access of developing countries to vaccines and other pandemic related supplies.

Dr Abdinasir Abubakar, Head of the Infectious Hazard Management Programme at the WHO Regional Office, noted that EMARIS meetings provided an important forum in which researchers, experts and representatives of ministries of health could exchange views and innovative ideas and promote research for the purpose of developing increasingly more effective influenza surveillance programmes.

In spite of many challenges, countries in the Region have made great progress in strengthening influenza preparedness – 19 out of 22 countries now have functioning epidemiological surveillance systems, of which 18 are reporting to global and regional platforms; 19 countries have a functioning national influenza centre with adequate capacity to detect season and novel influenza viruses; there has been a 5.5 fold increase in the number of specimens tested and reported, as well as a 10 fold increase in the number of virus isolates reported to and shared with WHO collaborating centres; and all 22 countries now have functioning and well-trained national rapid response teams.

WHO is committed to working with countries to tackle the threat of respiratory infections and a comprehensive and integrated regional strategic framework for the prevention and control of emerging and epidemic-prone infectious diseases has been developed, of which pandemic influenza preparedness is a major component. The framework was recently endorsed by the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean and countries of the Region have been encouraged to adapt its provisions to their local contexts.

A WHO Global Influenza Strategy for 2019 2030 has also been developed to protect people in all countries from the threat of influenza. Its goals are to prevent seasonal influenza, control the

spread of influenza from animals to humans, and prepare for the next influenza pandemic. It builds on the success of the Global Influenza Surveillance and Response System and the Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Framework as it integrates broader goals for prevention, control and preparedness for all countries.

Considerable progress in research focusing on influenza and other respiratory diseases had been made since the last meeting in 2017, with many research papers having been published by EMARIS network members in peer-reviewed journals and with ongoing WHO support to countries to promote research and innovation to address gaps in knowledge on influenza and other emerging infectious diseases.

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