

27 April 2021 – Thank you for joining us today for this special press briefing to mark World Immunization Week.

This year, the development and roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines sheds a new light on World Immunization Week. It shows us all in real time just how critical immunization is to control deadly diseases and save lives.

Before we talk more about immunization in our Region, I would like to update you on the COVID-19 situation in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. Both globally and regionally, there has been a substantial increase of cases over the past weeks.

Last year, in 2020, our Region reported 5 million cases in total. This year, in the first 13 weeks alone, an additional 3 million cases have been reported. From 17 March to 9 April 2021 – a 24-day period – we reported as many cases as we did in the first 6 months of 2020.

This is concerning, and there are other critical developments happening in other parts of the world – including in India – that can significantly affect the course of the pandemic in our Region.

Countries are doing all they can to protect their populations. But communities and individuals themselves need to exert extra efforts and do everything they can to protect themselves and others.

Adherence to mask use is concerningly low in some countries in the region. Religious events that involve social gatherings, like Ramadan and Easter – as well as the upcoming Sham El-Nessim and Eid – increase the chances of people being infected through close contact with people who may be sick without even knowing it.

There is not one person in this Region who has not been affected by COVID-19, either directly or indirectly. There is not one person who has not personally lost a loved one, or who has heard

of others who have lost family members.

The bleak reality of disease and death is all around us and in our daily lives. I call for a strong reawakening of our collective governmental, social, and individual responsibilities to protect ourselves and others.

I offer my condolences to everyone who has lost someone they love. And I offer my deep commitment that collectively, we will do everything we can to save as many lives as we can.

Sixteen months into this pandemic, we now have all the tools, competence and strengthened commitment to work towards ending transmission. Let us use them all to our full capacity, so we can start taking steps to resuming our normal lives.

Let me now turn to the issue of vaccines. As we mark World Immunization Week this year, we now have more vaccines to protect more people from more diseases.

Throughout history, vaccines have greatly reduced or eliminated many infectious diseases that once routinely killed or harmed infants, children, and adults. However, some of the viruses and bacteria that cause these diseases still exist and we can still get these diseases if we aren't vaccinated.

And yet every year, thousands of people become seriously ill and are hospitalized because of diseases that vaccines can help prevent. Many children and adults even die from these diseases.

By getting vaccinated, you can help protect yourself from much of this unnecessary suffering. Immunization is one of the best ways we can protect ourselves, our children and future generations from infectious diseases.

This year, accelerating scientific and technological innovations have made it possible to use

vaccines as a key tool to end the COVID-19 pandemic.

But while more than 36 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines have been administered across the Region, people are not being vaccinated at the rate that we need to see to bring us closer to stopping the spread of COVID-19.

While this may be due to vaccine shortages at a global level, vaccine hesitancy in our Region remains high. Vaccines work. I urge you all to take the COVID-19 vaccine when offered. This is not a personal choice; it is a personal responsibility. Denying yourself the vaccine only means that you are denying the right of yourself and others to live a disease-free life.

The tools that we have to control COVID-19 work, and they work better when used together. Masks and vaccines are part of a whole package that only works when practised together with physical distancing, handwashing, and proper cough and sneezing protocol. In contrast, we also know that complacency, ignorance and inaction do not work and contribute the worsening of the situation.

The solution is simple and in the hands of countries and populations alike: for us to be able to return to a COVID-19-free world, we need to take the steps that are needed to show that we care – about our own lives, the lives of others, and the future of our Region.

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