

The 61st session of the World Health Organization's Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean will open on 19 October 2014 in Tunis, Tunisia.

The opening session will be inaugurated by Minister of Health of Tunisia H.E. Professor Mohamed Saleh bin Ammar, Chairperson of the 60th session of the Regional Committee Dr Ahmed Bin Mohamed Al Saeedi and WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean Dr Ala Alwan.

The meeting will address a range of important health issues representing priorities for the countries of the Region. More than 200 people will participate in this ministerial event, including ministers of health; representatives of national, regional and international organizations, and experts from WHO headquarters and the Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean.

Members of the Regional Committee will review the annual report of the WHO Regional Director Dr Ala Alwan, which highlights the collaborative work of the Regional Office and Member States during 2013. It focuses on the major work undertaken in regard to the strategic priorities endorsed by the Regional Committee in 2012: health systems' strengthening towards universal health coverage, maternal and child health, noncommunicable diseases, communicable diseases, emergency preparedness and response, and WHO management and reform.

WHO will share with the participants documents highlighting the achievements and challenges in regard to: polio eradication, tobacco control, health-related Millennium Development Goals and health targets after 2015, regional strategy for health sector response to HIV 2011–2015, saving the lives of mothers and children, and shaping the future of health in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region.

Polio eradication, in particular, remains a great challenge in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, which is currently the most polio-affected in the world. Two of the three remaining endemic countries (Afghanistan and Pakistan) and two outbreaks (Syria and Somalia) pose serious threats to the regional and global eradication efforts.

The 61st session of the Regional Committee will discuss progress in the implementation of the

Political Declaration of the UN General Assembly on the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases. In addition, the very well-known TV anchor Laila Shaikhli will moderate a round table about the efforts needed to combat NCDs risk factors such as tobacco use, unhealthy diet, physical inactivity and harmful use of alcohol.

The Regional Committee will also address emergency preparedness and response. In the past two years, 13 countries in the Region have experienced large-scale emergencies, affecting more than 42 million people. Despite these experiences, the level of emergency preparedness and the capacity for crisis response and recovery remain low, especially with regard to the health sector.

A paper titled “health systems strengthening: progress and prospects 2012–2016” will be presented for consideration by the Regional Committee. In 2012, the 59th session of the Regional Committee urged Member States to implement a roadmap to improve health systems in seven key areas. This year’s paper summarizes the progress achieved two and half years later, and highlights the continuing challenges and realities in the Region. It updates the roadmap to make it more fit to strengthen the move towards universal health coverage.

The session will address the key challenge of reinforcing health information systems on the country level. Most countries of the Region are in a situation where health determinants are not regularly monitored. For example, cause-specific mortality is not reported in a complete and accurate manner, and coverage of interventions and health system performance are not adequately assessed. To support Member States in strengthening health information systems, participants will discuss two parallel but interconnected initiatives spearheaded by the Regional Office.

There are increasing possibilities of the global spread of outbreak-prone diseases and for the accidental or deliberate release of biological, chemical, radiological and nuclear agents. The importance of collective action to manage international health emergencies has been recognized. The International Health Regulations (2005) provide the legal framework for collective responsibility in ensuring global health security. This depends on the quality of national public health systems. This will be the subject of a technical discussion during the meeting.

Improving operational planning with Member States for collaborative work is another item on the agenda of the Regional Committee. The 2016–2017 biennium will focus on improving

operational planning to avoid fragmentation, identifying key priorities related to country needs where WHO can make a real difference, ensuring quality in the prioritization exercise and linking human resources strictly to the priorities identified.

Technical meetings will be held prior to the opening of the Regional Committee. The opening session will be held on the evening of Sunday, 19 October, 2014.

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Sunday 17th of February 2019 07:49:58 PM