In his opening speech before the 61st session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean, Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, said that WHO was currently facing an unprecedented situation as it responded to five high-level grade 3 emergencies around the world, two of which were in the Region.

Dr Alwan highlighted the humanitarian crises in Syria and Iraq, and the emergencies in Gaza, Libya and Yemen. He noted that WHO's public health capacity to detect, adjust and respond to emerging health threats needed to be considerably strengthened. He praised Tunisia for the major steps it had taken in the last three years to reform its health system.

In her opening address, Dr Margaret Chan, WHO Director-General, said that this was not an easy time for countries in WHO's six regions with unprecedented levels of conflict, senseless violence, natural and man-made disasters, climate change and increasing levels of antimicrobial resistance. Turning to the issue of emerging and re-emerging diseases she said that the Eastern Mediterranean Region was continuing to witness sporadic cases of Middle Eastern respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-COV) and that the US and Spain had both reported cases of Ebola. She said that the situation of Ebola was going to get worse before it got any better.

The opening session of the meeting was inaugurated by H.E. Dr Tawfiq Al Galassi, Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research of Tunisia, on behalf of H.E. Mehdi Jomaa, Prime Minister of Tunisia, who reiterated that the right to health could not be ensured without collective efforts of all countries, especially under the current difficult circumstances. In his opening remarks, H.E. Professor Mohamed El Saleh Ben Ammar, Minister of Health of Tunisia, praised the role of WHO in pushing forward the health agenda in the Region resulting in improved health indicators in many areas, such as communicable diseases, as well as reductions in child mortality rates and increased capacity-building of health workers. H.E. Professor Ben Ammar also reiterated the importance of coordinated regional efforts to improve the health of affected populations in Palestine, especially in Gaza, as well as in Syria and Iraq.

A press conference on Ebola was held on the sidelines of the pre-RC technical discussions, in which Dr Chan and Dr Alwan briefed the media on the current situation and global efforts to contain the outbreak.

Now that the Ebola virus has reached developed countries, such as the US and Spain, it indicated that the virus could be circulated through international travel despite the high level of preparedness by these countries. Many countries have asked for WHO's direct support in assessing their level of preparedness and scaling up their readiness measures and WHO will be deploying a team of experts to Morocco within 24 hours and to Tunisia in the coming days to assess levels of preparedness and guide the countries to step up necessary measures where gaps are identified. WHO will also support countries in training, laboratory diagnosis, risk communication and infection control measures.

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