

8 December 2020 – As winter starts across the Region, the pandemic continues to take a worrying course.

A few countries have made progress in controlling the outbreak, while others are still seeing unprecedented increases in the number of cases, and sometimes even the number of deaths.

Following a sharp increase in the number of cases over the past few weeks, Islamic Republic of Iran reached a milestone of one million cases since the start of the pandemic as of 3 December. Cases in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank continue to increase, with more than 1000 cases per day reported over the past 3 weeks. More than 2700 cases were reported on 3 December alone.

Egypt is seeing a regular increase in cases and deaths, with more than 400 cases per day. Pakistan is also reporting increasing cases and deaths, mostly from Sindh province.

Since the start of the pandemic, we have been working with all countries in the Region to provide guidance and recommendations for an effective response.

We have provided supplies, equipment and technical expertise. We have trained frontline health workers and we have educated communities. And we have been in continuous and close contact with ministers of health to address challenges and review lessons learned.

Today, I would like to focus on the support provided by the Regional Office to countries through technical missions. These missions allow us to see firsthand the actions being taken on the ground, so that we can better guide countries on how the response in all areas of work could be more effective.

Over the past few months, since the easing of travel restrictions by countries, public health experts covering different specializations have travelled from the Regional Office in Cairo to 7 countries.

I am joined today by colleagues who will provide a brief update and answer your questions on our most recent missions to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria and Tunisia.

But I would first like to say a few words on an issue currently receiving the extensive news coverage and public attention – the COVID-19 vaccine.

We have heard encouraging news about the safety and efficacy of at least 3 vaccines recently, and several vaccines are still in phase 3 trials.

Some countries have announced initial use of a vaccine for their populations. This step offers a glimpse of hope that the end of the pandemic may soon become a reality.

Working through the COVAX facility, WHO and partners are trying to ensure equitable distribution of effective vaccines to low- and middle-income countries once they are granted emergency use listing or authorization by an appropriate regulatory body. Through COVAX, approximately 20% of populations at highest risk will be prioritized for the vaccine.

However, this will leave many more people still at risk and the virus with an opportunity to continue to spread. We need to remain absolutely committed to promoting and adhering to all of the public health and social measures that we know work, including testing all suspect cases, isolating all confirmed cases and tracing contacts.

A vaccine for COVID-19 is not a magic solution to the situation we are all in today – a situation that has come about as a result of poor adherence to preventative measures by populations, and the need for greater efforts by countries.

As the holiday season approaches and temperatures further drop, the risk of increased transmission due to relaxed physical distancing, mask use, and other measures becomes even higher.

Recently, WHO released updated mask use guidance that advises the use of masks in indoor spaces when with other people, and where ventilation is poor or where air quality is unknown.

I urge us all to stay vigilant, take all precautions, and understand that the situation we are in today is one that can only be solved through the proven measures that we know work.

Thank you all and stay safe.

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