Health workers in a damaged area of Deir-Ez-Zor, Syrian Arab Republic19 August, 2015, Cairo, Egypt -- Every year, World Humanitarian Day provides us with the opportunity to recognize and honour the people who help other people -- the humanitarian aid workers who dedicate their lives to serving those in need.

This year’s theme focuses on health workers who provide health care under challenging circumstances, whether it be a conflict, natural disaster or resource-poor setting. These are familiar settings to the Eastern Mediterranean Region, where more than 60 million people are affected by emergencies, including almost 41.5 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in 3 countries experiencing major emergencies: Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

Working in an emergency setting is no easy task. In addition to an overwhelming workload in extremely challenging conditions, staff members are concerned about their own safety, and local staff members carry the added burden of ensuring the safety of their own families.

More than 3060 WHO international and national emergency staff and polio workers are currently working with focal points in ministries of health and partners throughout the Region to ensure that millions of men, women and children are able to receive the urgent health care and immunization services they need, even in the most difficult environments.

From the vaccinator in Afghanistan who cycles through dirt roads and hikes up mountain paths to immunize children against disease, to the surveillance officer in Yemen who monitors cases of infectious diseases among internally displaced persons, to the trauma surgeon in Somalia working in a field hospital with minimal resources, to the health worker in Pakistan who wades

through flood waters to deliver urgently needed medicines – these are the humanitarian aid workers who dedicate their lives to helping others.

Today, we thank them and recognize their contributions. Their selfless dedication and commitment to working in often dangerous and volatile settings is the reason why since the beginning of 2015, WHO was able to deliver life-saving treatments of medicines and medical supplies for more than 13.5 million people in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Despite ongoing violence, WHO staff and vaccinators in Syria and Iraq were able to successfully vaccinate more than 9.5 million children against polio and measles this year. This week in Yemen, vaccinators are going from house to house in sometimes remote and unsafe areas to reach more than 5.5 million children in a national polio, measles and rubella campaign.

In countries experiencing "forgotten" emergencies, such as Somalia and Sudan, decades of conflict and violence, compounded by natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes and drought, have left tens of millions struggling to survive. Health care workers in these countries work daily under challenging conditions with limited resources, and live in fear of constant attack. Despite this, their persistence and efforts have led to significant results: in July, Somalia announced that due to continuous immunization efforts, no polio cases have been reported in the country for one year. In Sudan, more than 6 million children were vaccinated from January to June in response to the current measles outbreak.

It is thanks to these health workers and hundreds of others throughout the Region, who are willing to put the well-being of others above all else, that WHO is able to fulfil its mission to save lives.

As we acknowledge their efforts, however, we need to also take a moment to pay tribute to those who have lost their lives while trying to save others. In the past 12 months, our region has witnessed repeated and targeted attacks on health care workers and health facilities in Afghanistan, Iraq, the occupied Palestinian territories, Sudan, Somalia, Syria and Yemen.

It is a sad fact that respect for the neutrality of health care workers and health facilities no longer exists in a number of countries in our Region today. Health workers, hospitals, and patients have come under direct attack in health facilities, as well as through disruptions to electricity and water supplies, fuel shortages or obstruction of access. Health facilities have been taken over for non-medical purposes. Health care workers have been killed, kidnapped, and assaulted. Ambulances have been looted, stolen, shot at and denied travel through

checkpoints.

The magnitude and scale of emergencies in our Region is unparalleled. As conflict and natural disasters continue to impact vulnerable populations, we must ensure that health care workers are allowed work without further risk to their lives, or the lives of their patients.

This World Humanitarian Day, I take the opportunity to express my sincerest gratitude to all health workers working in challenging environments, and make a special call for the safety and protection of those who face conflict and violence daily. Their unrelenting commitment to their work under the most difficult conditions ensures that all populations in the Region are able to preserve one of their most basic rights – the right to health.

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Health worker stories

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