16 March 2020, Cairo, Egypt – WHO's Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean held its first ministerial meeting of 2021 with 13 out of 22 ministers of health and WHO representatives in the Region. The meeting, led by WHO Regional Director Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, focused on reviewing the COVID-19 situation, response, and achievements at country level, and addressing common challenges to strengthen WHO's support to countries. Issues related to the arrivals of vaccines through the COVAX Facility were discussed, including delays in the arrival

of some shipments, as well as WHO's role in ensuring countries were prepared to receive and roll-out vaccination campaigns.

Unprecedented response in 3 phases

In his opening remarks, Dr Al Mandhari expressed his appreciation at the level of coordination, commitment, leadership, and response shown by countries. "As we mark a year since WHO declared the COVID-19 a global pandemic, our Region has calibrated a wealth of experience, despite all challenges faced," he said. "The Regional Office is in close coordination with Member States to put together response plans based on evidence, science, and collaboration," he added. Dr Al-Mandhari also emphasized that the pandemic has highlighted the essential role of leadership and coordination among countries of the Region.

Dr Al-Mandhari announced that the WHO Regional Office is working with health ministries in the Region to prepare for the upcoming Regional Committee (RC.67.6) meeting in October 2021 in Cairo. The annual meeting aims to reflect on the evolving needs in the Region, and is being held in parallel with other important coordination meetings that look closely into paving the way towards greater innovation, and a safe and healthy year for all countries in the Region.

During the meeting, Dr Al-Mandhari categorized the ongoing response to COVID-19 into 3 phases. As a new emerging disease, the first phase focused on understanding the disease, its source, dynamics, symptoms, genetic structure, features, and the science behind it. "As of now and with the support of our partners, we have achieved a lot within this dimension," he said. The second phase focused on joint efforts to put response plans in place to face the new threat in the Region. This was translated into providing life-saving medicines and medical supplies, including personal protective equipment for health workers, as well as strengthening national laboratory capacities and readiness to preform extensive tests and diagnostics. As a result of an unparalleled global mobilization of science, a search for solutions and a commitment to solidarity, the third phase of the response saw vaccine production and roll out just one year after the pandemic was declared.

Dr Richard Brennan, Director of Health Emergencies, informed ministers of health that COVID-19 cases had reached 117.5 million as of 11 March 2021, with 2 610 925 deaths globally, reflecting a sharp decline in the number of cases reported. However, across the Region over the past 4 weeks, the number of reported cases increased. "Last week, 17 countries reported an increase in reported cases and 16 countries documented increase in deaths in our Region," said Dr Brennan. "As of now, our Region hit a record of 6.77 million

cases and 149 164 deaths with 14 countries reporting emergence of variants of concerns," he added.

Dr Brennan added that as the pandemic evolves, our Region documents major achievements and success stories. The WHO Regional Office has scaled up rapid expansion and improvement of laboratory capacities and quality, with more than 650 testing laboratories established. The regional response also focused on repurposing existing systems and capacities, as well as strengthening leadership and coordination. Predictive modelling studies helped to inform the national response, with 7 countries in the Region regularly using modelling to inform public health management cooperation. Improving clinical management and intensive care units' capacities also resulted in better patient outcomes.

"Last year was unprecedent as several challenges faced our response to COVID-19," Dr Brennan said. "These include fragmented data systems, easing of public health social measures, insufficient data sharing with WHO and between countries, COVID-19 fatigue, inadequate infection prevention and control policies, the spread of rumours and misinformation, and a politization of the pandemic response," he added.

Dr Brennan stated that the way forward in fighting this pandemic has been paved. Last week, WHO released its updated strategic objectives for 2021 that brought together the joint efforts required to suppress transmission, reduce exposure, tackle misinformation, protect the vulnerable through vaccination, reduce mortality and morbidity from all cases, and accelerate equitable access to new COVID-19 tools. WHO-partner global, regional, and national incident management support structure focuses on coordination, planning, financing, and monitoring. It provides operational support, and logistics and supply chains as well advocates for research and innovation.

COVAX Facility delivers on promise

"As of today, 15 countries have commenced vaccination campaigns targeting health care workers on the frontlines, the elderly, and people with chronic diseases and comorbidities," said Dr Rana Hajjeh, Director of Programme Management. COVAX Facility has delivered vaccines to Sudan, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Djibouti, with more shipments expected to arrive in Palestine, Iraq and Tunisia in the coming days. Purchase orders for vaccines have been placed for Palestine, Libya, and Oman.

"As COVID-19 vaccines become a reality, COVID-19 is now a vaccine-preventable disease.

However, until everyone is vaccinated, countries must comply with the key precautions to prevent further transmission," Dr Hajjeh stressed.

Dr Hajjeh emphasized that despite the gloomy situation imposed by COVID-19, other staggering emergencies in our Region should not be forgotten. These crises are characterized by years of relentless conflict, social and political disruptions that have further devasted the lives of millions.

Countries in the Region leading on global vaccine roll out

Countries in the Region are recognized among the first globally to roll out COVID-19 vaccines to their populations. As of 13 March, 15 countries have administered a total of 13 million doses.

As a remarkable accomplishment, the United Arab Emirates leads on vaccine roll out in the Region, administrating over 6.28 million doses covering almost 45% of total residents as of 11 March 2021. As stated by His Excellency the Assistant Undersecretary for Health Centres and Clinics and Public Health Dr Hussain Al Rand and Director of Communicable Diseases, Dr Farida Al Hosani, the country's response to COVID-19 was based on a continuous assessment and evaluation of the epidemiological status to minimize the impact of the disease, focusing on health care readiness, adopting technologies, unifying communication, ensuring effective collaboration, and establishing an active national emergency response system.

Note on ministerial working group

As part of a large-scale response to support countries respond to COVID-19, WHO's Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean has been engaging with ministers of health on a regular and sustained basis to build consensus, foster evidence-based decision-making, and identify areas of WHO support. WHO's Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean continues to work with countries to provide technical guidance and safeguard health systems and public health protocols in parallel with the Regional Office's endeavours to ensure that everyone has access to better health care, by working collectively and closely with countries in the Region towards the health and well-being of the people by leveraging all opportunities and mobilizing all regional assets in line with WHO's global mission that promotes health, keep the world safe and serve the vulnerable.

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