



Sharm El Sheikh, 18 March 2023 – Amid the aftermath of the devastating earthquakes in the Syrian Arab Republic and Türkiye over a month ago, as well as the ongoing war in Ukraine now past its one-year mark, 3 WHO regional offices this week brought together governments, civil society and health partners in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, for the second high-level meeting on the health of refugees and migrants – a timely gathering to ensure that refugees and migrants have access to health care across the migration route during emergencies and beyond.

Hosted by the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, along with WHO's African and European regions, with support from WHO's Health and Migration Programme, the objective of this meeting is to move forward the implementation of strategic priorities agreed at last year's high-level meeting on refugee and migrant health in Türkiye, through interregional collaboration as part of a whole-of-route approach. It will also reaffirm commitment to the "WHO Global Action Plan on Promoting the Health of Refugees and Migrants", as well as sharing specific advances in promoting the health of refugees and migrants in the three regions.

Encompassing a total of 122 countries and territories, the 3 WHO regions have witnessed or otherwise been impacted by large-scale migration and population displacement stemming from diverse factors in recent years, both within their territories and beyond. This year marks 12 years since the start of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic and a year since the onset of the war in Ukraine. Numerous other crises are also at play, including those triggered by climate change. An estimated 171 million refugees and migrants in total are now hosted in countries of the three regions – almost two thirds of all refugees and migrants globally.

"In a region plagued with protracted emergencies, refugees and migrants are a permanent feature of our societies, yet they remain in many cases among the most vulnerable and neglected communities," said Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean. "A whole-of-route approach to refugee and migrant health is essential to an inclusive health system, a step in the direction of universal health coverage and an integral part of our regional vision of health for all by all."

In the past month, WHO's Eastern Mediterranean and European regions have jointly faced one of the most devastating natural disasters in recent years, with more than 26 million people affected by the large-scale earthquakes in Türkiye that caused widespread damage both there and the neighbouring Syrian Arab Republic. The situation remains dire, with millions forced out of their homes in both countries and increasing pressure on an already-fragile health system in the Syrian Arab Republic. In Türkiye, 1.7 million Syrian refugees living under temporary protection have been impacted as well. In the Syrian Arab Republic, 5.3 million people are reported to require shelter assistance, including many previously displaced and currently in insecure and unsafe accommodation.

"Although this week's meeting was planned long before this tragic disaster, the situation underscores the urgent need to continue the tri-regional collaboration on migrant and refugee health that began last year with the first high-level meeting in Istanbul," noted Dr Al-Mandhari. "We are committed to working together to address the health injustices impacting migrant and refugee communities across our regions."

The Eastern Mediterranean is the WHO Region with the largest number of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). More than half of all refugees globally originate from within the Region, the majority of whom remain in the Region.

Many of those in vulnerable situations continue to face increased risk of poor health outcomes, including mental health, due to poor living and working conditions, different forms of discrimination, exposure to violence and lack of access to timely and high-quality health care along migration pathways, among other factors.

Weakened and overwhelmed health systems and significant health workforce shortages compound the challenges. While universal health coverage has long been a core commitment of the Member States in the WHO African, Eastern Mediterranean and European regions, many refugees and migrants remain left out within national and subnational health strategies.

"In the WHO European Region, we are currently responding to the earthquake in Türkiye – one of our 53 Member States - as well as continuing to address the largest displacement in the Region since World War Two with over 8 million refugees from Ukraine recorded across Europe. It's clear that from emergency responses to long-term efforts to achieve universal

health coverage, we must include refugees and migrants. For this we need to take a dual-track approach: preparing and responding to health emergencies better, while also providing everyday inclusive health services for all,” emphasized Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe.

“Without considering migrants and refugees, we cannot achieve universal health coverage. We must mainstream their health needs in all programmes; It is a core part of protecting migrants’ human rights” said Dr Matshidiso Moeti, WHO Regional Director for Africa.

This meeting echoes commitments to prioritize refugee and migrant health on international and regional agendas, underpinned by the principles of solidarity, humanity, human rights and sustainable development.

“The WHO African, European and Eastern Mediterranean regions, and the participants of this meeting, commit to concerted action to strengthen progress toward achieving universal health coverage, and to promote inclusion of refugees and migrants in national health policies and plans across routes of migration and in humanitarian settings” stated the meeting outcome statement.

The statement also specified “the representatives also commit to work together on forging partnerships and identifying opportunities for collaboration across the migration routes to address some of the most pressing issues we are collectively facing including climate change, the root causes of forced displacement and access to health care for refugees and irregular migrants.”

This event contributes to the discussion to be co-organized by the WHO Health and Migration Programme, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the Government of the Kingdom of Morocco later in 2023 during the third Global consultation on the health of refugees and migrants.

The second high-level interregional meeting is supported by the UHC Partnership, one of WHO’s largest platforms for international cooperation on UHC and primary health care. It is funded by Belgium, Canada, European Union, Germany, Luxembourg – Aid & Development, Ireland – Irish Aid, France – Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères, Japan – Ministry

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