

19 August 2020 – Today, on World Humanitarian Day, I would like to acknowledge the bravery and dedication of humanitarian aid workers and health staff across the Eastern Mediterranean Region and beyond.

Health workers and humanitarians in our Region work under some of the most challenging contexts in the world, where many countries are facing political instability, violent conflict, natural disasters, and multiple disease outbreaks.

In fact, our Region comprises 9% of the world's population but is home to 43% of those needing humanitarian assistance. In previous years, attacks on health care workers in our Region have consistently been presented as some of the highest numbers worldwide.

This year, the already difficult work carried out by humanitarians in our Region has been made even more so by the COVID-19 pandemic. Health care workers are at increased risk of infection, they are overwhelmed, sometimes working with limited resources, and many have chosen to remain away from their families so as not to expose them to potential infection.

Yet health workers and humanitarians in our Region carry on with their noble task of serving humanity, forgetting about the risks they are exposed to and putting their lives as shields to protect others.

Some have been exposed to attacks and discrimination, adding to their stress and compromising their safety. Just this year alone WHO's surveillance system for attacks on health care recorded 89 incidents between 1 January and 31 July from 6 countries in our Region (Afghanistan, Libya, occupied Palestinian territory, Somalia, Syria and Yemen) resulting in 97 deaths and 149 injuries of health care workers and patients. Additional incidents were also identified through secondary sources in Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan and Lebanon.

Despite ever-challenging conditions, humanitarians and health workers put the lives of others before all else. We have heard tragic stories of doctors in Yemen losing their lives to cholera, of polio workers being infected with COVID-19 as they work to reach communities in need, of health care workers in Syria falling victim to attacks on health care.

Just last week, we all witnessed the bravery of community volunteers, the humanitarian community and health workers in Lebanon following the Beirut port blast that killed almost 200 people and injured thousands. This response to this major humanitarian crisis has been widely recognized, but today I would like to also acknowledge the bravery and efforts of all those involved.

