

20 May 2020 – The current COVID-19 pandemic has shown us all the severe and unimaginable impact that a public health threat can have on individuals, communities and nations. We have often said that infectious diseases respect no borders, and that an outbreak in one country can threaten the health security of the Region and beyond. Today, we are witnessing this warning become a reality of alarming scale and proportion.

With almost 5 million people affected, including more than 300 000 killed, entire countries under lockdown, and economies plummeting, people around the world are experiencing unprecedented levels of isolation, anxiety and fear of what lies ahead.

But within this dark reality, there are glimmers of hope and solidarity that show humanity at its best when faced with a common enemy. Communities have come together like never before, showing support to each other and all workforces involved in the response.

Community volunteers in Islamic Republic of Iran produced hundreds of thousands of masks to help people stay protected. In Sudan, pharmacy students came together to distribute one million hand sanitizers to poor families. In Egypt, youth organizations collaborated to launch an initiative to support the mental health of their peers. In Jordan, as the country faced the height of its lockdown, community volunteers and youth groups, in coordination with the Ministry of Health, delivered medications to patients with chronic diseases.

We have also seen unprecedented levels of solidarity by countries in our Region to the global and regional response, with a focus on swift action and support to the most vulnerable countries.

The African Union, of which 7 countries in our Region are members, has come together once more under the leadership of the Ethiopian Prime Minister to support countries in need with COVID-19 supplies.

Egypt has delivered COVID-19 supplies to Sudan, Italy, China and the United States on 6 planes loaded with aid, and an additional 10 tonnes of equipment to protect thousands of health care workers fighting tirelessly on the frontlines of the battle against this disease.

Saudi Arabia facilitated a charter flight to carry urgently needed WHO COVID-19 response supplies to Yemen and has also donated US\$ 10 million to WHO's global response plan and US\$ 10 million to fighting COVID-19 in Yemen specifically. The current G20 chair, Saudi Arabia also recently pledged US\$ 500 million to support global efforts to combat the pandemic.

Jordan has sent doctors and medical equipment to the United States, protective equipment for health care workers to Japan, medicines to Tunisia, and protective equipment and supplies to Belgium.

Kuwait remains one of the top donors contributing to WHO's global and regional COVID-19 response plans, allowing WHO to scale up its activities worldwide, including in 6 countries of our Region with some of the most vulnerable populations, including refugees.

Oman donated swabs and testing kits to Yemen, and generously opened its borders to facilitate delivery of COVID-19 supplies into the war-torn country.

Just a few days ago, Qatar sent a shipment of 10 tonnes of supplies to Somalia, which will benefit all regions of the country that have urgent needs. Earlier this month, Qatar also delivered several shipments of 25 tonnes of medical aid to the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Republic of Albania and the Republic of Angola to support their response efforts. Qatar has also delivered 85 tonnes of supplies to Islamic Republic of Iran, Italy, Lebanon, Tunisia, Algeria, Nepal and Rwanda.

The United Arab Emirates provided four charter flights from our logistics hub in Dubai that allowed WHO and partners to deliver urgently needed supplies and technical teams to Islamic Republic of Iran, Somalia, and Ethiopia. Recently, United Arab Emirates also provided WHO with an-kind donation of US\$ 10 million worth of PCR testing kits, enough to provide 500 000 tests for suspected COVID-19 patients. These tests will significantly scale up testing capacity in Africa and our Region as we race to contain further transmission.

These heartwarming examples of regional solidarity and beyond are a powerful reminder that what we have in common is stronger than the differences that drive us apart. More than ever, as

global health is under fire, we need to continue to stand firmly together for the sake of the common good.

While much has been done – and continues to be done – we need to keep building on this positive momentum. Let us use this pandemic as an opportunity and mark it as the moment that countries put their differences aside. We have been starkly reminded that no one is safe, until every single person is safe, regardless of geographical location or political affiliation. Let us use health as a bridge to peace, as we have successfully done in the past.

As we work together for the sake of humanity, let us also remember our regional vision, now clearer than ever before, that “health for all” can only be achieved “by all”.

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