30 September 2020 – COVID-19 is now a part of our daily lives. It is affecting the way we work, learn, communicate and manage our relationships. While people are eager to return to their normal lives, the reality is that the situation is not getting any better.

New cases globally and in the Eastern Mediterranean Region are increasing. More than one million people have died globally, including more than 60 000 in our Region. These are not just numbers – they are people whose lives have been tragically taken, leaving loved ones behind struggling to cope with their loss.

58% of new cases this week were reported from only 3 countries: Iraq, Islamic Republic of Iran and Morocco, and countries with the largest increase in reported cases were Jordan, Tunisia and Lebanon. Deaths in the Region also increased, with 66% this week reported from 2 countries only: the Islamic Republic of Iran and Iraq. Jordan, had the largest increase in deaths, followed by Tunisia and Lebanon.

COVID-19 has shown that the world was very much underprepared to respond. Today, the pandemic is far from being over. Intense transmission is still ongoing in many countries, and most people remain susceptible. As we work with countries and partners to contain transmission, we are also racing to find a vaccine, which is the fastest and safest way to achieve the level of immunity we need to protect people and end the pandemic.

There are currently 191 COVID-19 vaccine candidates under development, 40 of which are in human clinical evaluation, among which 10 have reached phase 3 trials. Seven countries in our Region are actively participating in Phase 3 of vaccine trials, including Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. We encourage other countries in the Region to actively participate in the third phase of vaccine trial for COVID-19.

When a safe and effective vaccine is found, the COVAX Facility (led by WHO, GAVI and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations) aims to coordinate equitable access and distribution among all countries and territories, regardless of their economic situation.

So far, 156 countries have signed up to the COVAX Facility, representing 64% of the world's

population. A further 38 countries are in talks to join, so we expect this number to grow. This is a huge vote of confidence in the Facility. A vast majority of countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region are joining the COVAX Facility, with 11 as self-financing countries and the other 11 under GAVI's advanced market commitment which will provide financial support to eligible countries to purchase the vaccine, based on their economic status.

Once a vaccine is shown to be safe and effective and is authorized for use, WHO advises all countries to distribute doses to cover 20% of their population, starting with the high-risk groups of health care workers, older adults, and those with underlying health conditions. A fair distribution of vaccines is not only the right thing to do, it's the smart thing to do to control the pandemic.

A COVID-19 vaccine will be a precious resource, and some countries have taken steps to protect their populations by directly securing supplies of vaccines. It is understandable that leaders want to protect their own people first, but the response to this global pandemic must be collective, and the leaders of countries will need to take a global view. To stop the pandemic quickly and efficiently, we need to avoid "vaccine nationalism".

If we don't work together on a global plan to manage vaccine distribution fairly, there may be unnecessary price spikes, with unneeded hoarding in some places and life-threatening shortages in others. Purchasing a vaccine unilaterally may also risk paying for a vaccine that does not ultimately prove to be safe or effective. Joining the portfolio of vaccines under the COVAX Facility mitigates that risk.

As WHO's Director-General Dr Tedros said: No one is safe until everyone is safe. It is important to work together to ensure that everyone in the world who needs a COVID-19 vaccine will have it.

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