

27 January 2021 – Dear colleagues, welcome to our first press briefing in 2021.

When we look back on 2020, we see a catastrophic year, brought on by a global pandemic that continues to devastate, taking lives and livelihoods, and leaving in its path fear and grief.

We saw regional and national capacities stretched to their limit as efforts to battle this new disease were impeded by chronic and acute humanitarian emergencies, including 9 ongoing humanitarian crises. Among other events, we also worked hard to respond to the port blast in Lebanon, floods in Sudan and outbreaks of vaccine-derived poliovirus in Sudan and Yemen.

This month, the world reached the grim milestone of 100 million cases of COVID-19, including more than 5 million cases in our Region. This is a stark reminder that comprehensive disease control efforts must continue to be aggressively scaled up by governments, and communities, with the support of WHO and partners.

But 2020 also provided us with opportunities to transform the way we work, both at a regional and country level, as well as with our partners and national counterparts at all levels.

At a national level, all countries in the Region established and maintained effective multisectoral mechanisms to better coordinate the response activities within government institutions and with other stakeholders, while promoting strong partnerships with communities and the private sector. Often, these national coordination mechanisms were chaired by the President or the Prime Minister, clearly showing strong leadership and commitment at the highest levels of government.

We continued to enhance preparedness and response capacities at national and subnational level within the context of COVID-19, as well as build on our partnerships with the private sector, and scale up our work with communities.

Testing capacity for COVID-19 was expanded and enhanced, from 20 laboratories with PCR

testing capacity across the Region at the beginning of 2020, to over 450 laboratories by the end of the year. I hope that you agree that this is a remarkable achievement.

Intensive and critical care capacities in all countries were strengthened through training and mentoring by regional experts, and infection and prevention control (IPC) practices were promoted through the establishing of strong IPC policy and programmes at national and subnational levels.

Our logistics hub in Dubai proved instrumental in ensuring that essential supplies were delivered to all countries, especially those facing complex emergencies. Close to 440 shipments of medical supplies were delivered to 110 countries across all 6 WHO regions. This is a huge increase in operations compared to 2019, when the hub delivered 92 shipments of medical supplies to 22 countries across 3 WHO regions.

Through global efforts, safe and effective *COVID-19 vaccines have been developed*.¹ *I am pleased to state that vaccinations have already commenced in 8 countries across the Region, targeting high risk groups*.²

But we need to ensure fair and equitable access and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines to all countries, and especially for vulnerable people living in the toughest of humanitarian contexts.

While this overview of accomplishments is impressive, we remain a long way off in controlling the pandemic. And we must prepare ourselves for another year of tackling this enemy. Just over the past 2 weeks, we have seen a rise in the number of cases, after several weeks of decline. This is likely associated with festivities over the holiday period and with the colder weather. We must remain vigilant and use all the tools at our disposal to tackle this virus.

And while the response to the COVID-19 pandemic remains our number one priority, we must not forget the many other ongoing emergencies that also require our urgent attention.

This year, more than 235 million people will require humanitarian assistance worldwide – a massive increase of 40% from last year. Forty-three percent (43%) of these people live in our

Region, where, as I mentioned, we are also responding to 9 large-scale humanitarian crises. In these settings, countless people continue to die needlessly and anonymously from preventable infectious diseases, untreated noncommunicable diseases, violent trauma, obstetric complications, neonatal causes, malnutrition and other causes.

We must continue to strengthen work in these countries, expanding access to essential health services, rebuilding health systems, advancing health security, and realizing the right to health of some of the most vulnerable people on the planet. And we can only do this together by working closely with the communities themselves to strengthen their awareness and engagement on issues related to their own health and well-being.

Despite the challenges that face us, I am confident that through our continued solidarity and action, we can succeed in 2021 in working toward our regional goal of health for all by all.

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