

6 June 2021, Islamabad – On the first day of a week’s mission to Pakistan, WHO’s Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari formally opened 2 COVID-19 vaccination centres, a laboratory for infectious disease testing, a nutrition stabilization centre for children, and a refurbished gymnasium to help combat noncommunicable diseases. WHO Representative Dr Palitha Mahipala and representatives from government participated in these events. Dr Al-Mandhari is in Pakistan to participate in a visit by the Polio Oversight Board, meeting with high-level leadership and supporting the emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“It is a pleasure for me to visit and support Pakistan at this important time. Pakistan is facing 2 public health emergencies of international concern: polio and COVID-19. I appreciate the Government of Pakistan’s robust response and commitment to both. With this dual challenge, it is one of my key priorities to mobilize political and financial support for the country,” said Dr Al-Mandhari.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the country has implemented several public health interventions, including restricted travel, school and market closures and vaccination campaigns, to curb cases. In February 2021, Pakistan launched its first targeted vaccination campaigns, successfully vaccinating 8.5 million people to date. Vaccination has been opened to all citizens above the age of 18, for which the Government has established over 2000 vaccination centres across Pakistan.

At the events held to formally open the newest vaccination centre in densely populated sector G9 and visit to the mass vaccination centre in F9 in Islamabad, Dr Al-Mandhari highlighted the importance of vaccination in the response to COVID-19. “Vaccination is a key tool in ending this pandemic, but it is not a magic bullet that can do this alone. People still need to adhere to the proven measures that work, such as mask use and physical distancing. While it is reassuring to see so many people being vaccinated, no one is safe until everyone is safe, and we all need to play a part in protecting others who may still be at risk,” Dr Al-Mandhari stressed.

In order to strengthen access to high-quality health services, WHO has also been supporting Pakistan's Institute of Medical Sciences, one of Pakistan’s main government tertiary hospitals. During his visit, Dr Al-Mandhari opened the refurbished molecular diagnostic laboratory which increases COVID-19 testing capacity with up to 400 tests per day. This will support the timely detection and response to infectious disease outbreaks, like COVID-19.

Additionally, Dr Al-Mandhari opened the nutrition stabilization centre in the Institute of Medical Sciences, proclaiming it “state-of-the-art” and serving as an example for the Region. Due to a recent uptick in the number of malnourished children, WHO extended multifaceted support to enable the integrated approach of counselling and treatment of infants and young children at the hospital. The centre is now capable of treating critically ill children with severe complications, as well as addressing early child development in the playroom, facilitating swift recoveries.

Pakistan faces a high burden of noncommunicable diseases, accounting for an estimated 57% of all deaths. These comprise mainly cardiovascular diseases (30%), cancers (8%) and respiratory diseases (5%). Physical inactivity, directly contributing to noncommunicable diseases, is a global public health problem. To address this, WHO has supported gyms, mostly open-air, with free access to the public in Islamabad. Opening the eighth gym of Islamabad for residents living close to the National Institute of Health, Dr Al-Mandhari said, “Increasing physical activity is the best way to keep healthy and I encourage everyone to enjoy the benefit of these facilities.”

Meeting with Minister of Interior Sheikh Rasheed Ahmed and other state officials, Dr Al-Mandhari advocated to put health at the centre of the development agenda in Pakistan, stressing that good health and well-being were the key foundations of a prosperous society.

At the end of his first day, Dr Al-Mandhari commented, “I have been very impressed with the Government of Pakistan and its robust health response. My admiration also goes to the courageous and hard-working health workers I’ve met today. This strengthens my resolve to ensure WHO continues to receive all the required support to advance their universal health care agenda. Good health is a human right, and no one should be left behind.”

Friday 26th of April 2024 11:30:51 AM