Outbreaks

Responding to emerging health threats: guarding health security

In today's interconnected world, infectious diseases emerge and spread faster than ever before. Infectious diseases know no borders, they can spread rapidly from their source between countries causing a serious security challenge in other countries. Throughout 2013, regional efforts continued to enhance the abilities of countries to prevent, detect and respond to outbreaks of infectious disease threats to make the Region safe and secure from the health threats posed by the emergence of dangerous pathogens.

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Syria crisis

Scaling up epidemic readiness in Syria pays off as humanitarian crisis worsens

In 2013, the humanitarian crisis in Syria posed a grave and acute risk to public health in other countries in the Region affected by the crisis. As the influx of Syrian refugees continued to pour into neighbouring countries owing to the conflict, national health systems were stretched to their limits.

With thousands of Syrians crossing the border each day, not only was there a potential risk of introducing diseases prevalent inside Syria to neighbouring countries but also mounting fear that failing health systems and disruption of regular public health programmes in Syria may lead to outbreaks in the neighbouring countries of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt as a result of population movement and overstretched health services.

By June 2013, according to UNHCR sources, the number of registered Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries exceeded 1.8 million and the situation was viewed as one of the worst humanitarian crises and conflicts the world had seen in decades. In view of an anticipated risk to public health, the WHO Regional Office continued to support national health authorities of these affected countries to scale up epidemic preparedness and readiness measures. As part of these measures, epidemic risk assessment was conducted, training for front-line health care workers conducted on management of outbreaks, an early warning surveillance system for detecting outbreaks was established and rapidly scaled up, and country capacities for diagnosis and detection of infectious diseases was enhanced.

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MERS

MERS: efforts to unravel the mystery continued throughout 2013

In 2013, the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean continued its efforts to

improve public health preparedness to effectively respond to the outbreak caused by MERS-CoV which has killed over half of the cases reported so far. Although most cases confirmed so far in the Region have been sporadic with an unknown source of infection, human-to-human transmission has been reported in health care and household settings. However, as the source of infection and mode of disease transmission remained largely unknown, the collaborative efforts of the Regional Office continued with health authorities of affected countries and other international health agencies resulting in a steady increase in knowledge on the evolution of this novel virus, as well as improved surveillance for early detection, prevention and rapid control of any sign that the virus was evolving into the cause of an another international public health emergency.

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