22 November 2018 – The Infectious Hazard Management unit of WHO’s Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean has launched a series of activities to scale up Ebola preparedness and readiness. Although no cases of Ebola virus disease (EVD) have yet been reported from the Eastern Mediterranean Region, the risk of importation of cases from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where an outbreak of EVD is currently ongoing, cannot be ignored. Owing to frequent international travel and population movement, a disease outbreak in
one country can become a regional or global concern in a matter of days.

To help countries in the Region prepare for early detection of any possible importation of the disease, a comprehensive set of public health measures are being scaled up in the high-risk countries, including enhancing surveillance, sample collection and laboratory testing. As part of the plan, a technical mission will be conducted in Sudan and other countries near the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Rapid Response Teams in Libya, Pakistan and Somalia will receive additional training on detection and contact tracing for EVD, and countries will be provided with laboratory diagnostic kits including personal protective equipment, as well as information and knowledge on how to set up an Ebola treatment centre in case any suspected case is detected.

During the 2014–2015 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, similar preparedness efforts helped ensure that all countries in the Region remained free from Ebola. The importance of preparedness, especially in countries that are already facing a variety of man-made and natural disasters and crises, can hardly be overstated.

As reported in the Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal, experience with managing outbreaks of Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) and pandemic influenza (H1N1) has driven efforts to “establish effective multisectoral coordination mechanisms, enhance surveillance, improve laboratory diagnostic and risk communication capacity, and strengthen case management and infection control practices in health facilities.” The current work on enhancing preparedness for EVD is likely to improve public health preparedness measures to address not only Ebola but also other emerging and epidemic-prone diseases.