

The world has moved closer to an Influenza pandemic than at any time since 1968. It is estimated that the next influenza pandemic will result in million deaths worldwide, and between 150-750 thousands deaths in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. This was discussed by Member States at the 53rd Session of the Regional Committee(RC) for the Eastern Mediterranean currently convened in Isfahan, the Islamic Republic of Iran. A presentation on the Regional Strategy on preparedness and response for human influenza pandemic showed that the world is currently in phase 3 of the six-phase alert system in which a new influenza virus subtype was causing death in humans but fortunately not yet spreading efficiently.

Discussions followed the presentation showed that Egypt was the most affected Member State in the Region with 14 human cases of whom 6 had died.

Transparency, political commitment, capacity and laboratory building, hygiene, avoiding crowds and reaching the public through media and communication are key elements in facing the pandemic.

During the RC, a report was launched on chronic and non communicable diseases warning that these diseases are major causes of death and disability worldwide and account for 52% of all deaths in the Region. The highlighted diseases are: cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes, malaria, respiratory diseases and tuberculosis. For example, deaths from Diabetes are projected to increase by 50% in the next 10 years.

The deteriorating health situation in the occupied Palestinian territories was highlighted. It was described as a chronic and acute humanitarian crisis caused by 5 years of restricted movements, insecurity, conflicts and the gap in provision of financing especially in the public sector.

The presentation outlined two key areas of support; providing sustainable funding to the Ministry of Health in Palestinian territories, and documenting the violation of human rights and international humanitarian law.

The health situation in Lebanon was also focused upon in the aftermath of the recent war against Lebanon. The timely humanitarian aid and relief efforts exerted by the Lebanese Ministry of Public Health and supported by Member States, WHO and partners in harmonized method were hailed during the RC. However it expressed growing concern over the size of damage affecting the health infrastructure and the unexploded ordnance and land mines scattered throughout and causing at least one death and 3 injured per day. The health situation in Lebanon was also addressed by Dr Andres Nordstrom, Acting Director General of the World Health Organization who noted that the health system in the south has been severely weakened and expressed the necessity to focus on sustainable health services there. The RC emphasized the need to support recovery efforts in Lebanon and investment in disaster preparedness capacity at the national level.

Further more during the RC, Dr Nordstrom congratulated Eastern Mediterranean Region on the success of the Regional Strategy for Malaria. In all 9 endemic countries, the malaria burden has decreased, and malaria elimination in Egypt, Morocco, Oman and Arab Republic of Syria was potentially sustainable.

Reviewing the annual report on the work of the WHO for the year 2005, Dr Gezairy said that at least 70% of emerging diseases were zoonotic in origin and that veterinary public health was a major issue and one that has to be very clearly addressed in this Region.

Dr Gezairy mentioned that the Region continued to make steady progress in achieving global and Regional targets in disease control. Good progress had been achieved in Directly Observed Treatment, short course(DOTS) population coverage for Tuberculosis and treatment success rates were high with the regional rate at 82%. However detecting cases still as low as 38%.He said that there had been an over all increase in immunization coverage last year.” That no child should die from a vaccine-preventable disease in the Region was a joint vision”

Turning to polio, he said that the top priority for the Regional polio programme was to interrupt virus transmission in the two remaining endemic countries of the Region “It is equally important to keep the polio-free status in the countries that had been declared free” he added.

The public health problems of alcohol consumption in the Region were also reviewed by Member States. 2 billion people worldwide consumed alcohol of whom 76 millions suffer from alcohol consumption disorders. Though alcohol consumption is not among the first 15 causes of losing years in the Region, the presentation warned that it is becoming a rising trend especially among young people and a potential threat to health.

During the first three days of the Regional Committee other issues were also reviewed such as the medium term strategic plan 2008-2013 and the programme budget of the coming biennium and the experience of the Islamic Republic of Iran in integrating medical education and health services.

The 53rd session of the Regional Committee will close tomorrow with declaring the recommendations and resolutions taken by Member States.

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