

Under exceptional global and regional conditions, the Eastern Mediterranean Regional Committee holds its fifty eighth session at the premises of the World Health Organization Regional Office in Cairo, during the period 2-5 October 2011. The fierce humanitarian crisis in Somalia throws its shadows over the meetings of this session, particularly that it broke out while the world is yet to recover from the consequences of the financial crisis. This was the reason of the lack of an adequate response to this crisis in regards to the urgently needed humanitarian relief of this ill-fated country. Moreover, outcomes of the financial crisis have affected all health activities within the organization as well as the plans of its reform and reorganization.

In the meantime, this session takes place while a number of countries in the Region is experiencing a call for change associated with a state of instability, which has its negative impact on public health.

The election of a new regional director to succeed Dr Hussein Gezairy, the Eastern Mediterranean Regional Director, whose term will end on 30 September 2012, shall also take place during this session.

Several issues and important health topics are put on the table of discussion for the Regional Committee; being the highest governing body of WHO, at the regional level.

These issues and topics will be reviewed and scrutinized by ministers of health of the Member States and their representatives. Dr Margaret Chan, Director General of the World Health Organization, Dr Hussein Gezairy, Eastern Mediterranean Regional Director and representatives of global, regional and national health-related agencies and organizations, together with experts from the Regional office and WHO Headquarters will take part in this session.

Among the issues put for discussion are the double burden of diseases faced by many countries in the Region, some of which suffer from outbreaks of infectious diseases, while they are all burdened by non-communicable diseases. On top of the agenda of this session is ways of cancer prevention. Breast cancer is the most common type of cancer among females in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. Strong commitment has been shown by countries of the Region in the area of breast cancer screening and early detection, through educational and orientation sessions on self-examination of the breast. The Regional Office and partners mobilize

resources to finance such training and education in this area as well as the area of palliative care.

The Fifty Eighth Session of the Eastern Mediterranean Regional Committee will also review a progress report on this topic with a view to address the obstacles represented in the weak political commitment, financial constraints and deficient national capacity in most of the areas of cancer prevention and control.

Another topic put for discussion by Fifty Eighth session is the Mental, neurological and substance use disorders, which affect all social groups and ages, contributing to 14% and 12% of the burden of disease globally and regionally, respectively. Mental health and its problems are a public health issue inextricably linked to quality of life, productivity and social capital. This highlights the importance of the Regional strategy for mental health and substance abuse, covering the period 2012-2016. This strategy will be looked into by the Fifty Eighth Session of the Eastern Mediterranean Regional Committee during its meetings.

Tobacco control is well positioned on the agenda of the Regional Committee. There is a growing evidence that raising the price of tobacco products through tax increases is the most effective way to reduce tobacco use. High prices discourage youth and nonsmokers from taking up smoking, encourage current smokers to quit, prevent former smokers from renewing smoking and increase countries' revenues, which can be allocated to finance health and tobacco control programmes.

The WHO Report on the Global Tobacco Epidemic 2008 indicated that increasing tobacco taxes by 10% generally decreases tobacco consumption by 4% in high-income countries and by about 8% in low-income and middle-income countries, while tobacco tax revenues increases by nearly 7%.

A progress report on this topic will be discussed by the Fifty Eighth Session of the Regional committee.

Addressing the problem of speed and securing safety on the road should yield much benefit to economy. It saves a considerable portion of health expenditure as well the money spent to redress damage, losses and rehabilitation. More importantly, to save the lives lost in road

crashes, something that money can never make it up.

Within the framework of tropical disease control, malaria still constitutes a priority health problem in a number of countries of the Region. The more progress is made in malaria control, the more advancement is achieved on the road to realizing important health and development goals such as “Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger” and “Reduce Child Mortality” as well as “Improve Maternal Health”. It is in this context that World Health Assembly, in 2005, urged Member States to ensure that at least 80% of those at risk should have access to antimalarial interventions by 2010.

The Regional Committee designates a part of the discussions to the Influenza Pandemic H1N1. WHO declared the end of the influenza pandemic on 10 August 2010, as the transmission of influenza caused by this novel virus had slowed considerably across the globe, following its rapid transmission over a year and a half, when more than 214 countries and overseas territories worldwide had reported laboratory-confirmed cases of Pandemic H1N1 influenza, with approximately 18500 reported deaths.

The World is now in the post-Pandemic period. The Pandemic H1N1 2009 influenza virus has taken on the behavior of a seasonal influenza variant. Vigilance on the part of national health authorities however, will remain critical and monitors of respiratory disease activities must therefore be maintained.

Total elimination of malaria in the region is faced by many challenges, which will be discussed in this Regional Committee meetings.

Another topic to be discussed by the Regional Committee in Poliomyelitis. On going crises faced in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, man-made and natural, have had a negative impact on Polio eradication efforts, particularly in the two remaining countries, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Despite these challenges, the Region continued to proceed towards achieving the Polio eradication target, with 19 Member States maintain their Polio-free status and Sudan successfully regaining its Polio-free status after an epidemic that occurred as a result of importation in 2008.

Poverty is the basics for not achieving the Millennium Development Goals in many countries of

the world, including these in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region. Progress towards achieving MDGs is faced by a number of countries in the Region. These challenges keep at least 10 countries in this Region from achieving these goals. Participants in the Regional Committee meetings will be looking into ways to overcome these challenges and defeat them.

Health research is of highly importance for health work planning, given the fact that it draws the attention to the ever changing socioeconomic and environmental scenarios, during population health planning. Health research is deficient in the Eastern Mediterranean Region and support to its implementation is much needed.

In the meantime, the Regional Office confirmed much earlier before, the need to bridge the gap between health researchers and decision makers in the Region and that it was time for a shift of thinking as to the way health research should be conducted to inform health and development policies, strategies and evidence-based interventions. The Regional Committee endeavors, in this session , to achieve progress in this direction. There will be also room for many important health topics as well as resolutions and decisions adopted by the World Health Assembly in its recent meetings.

In the opening session of the Regional Committee, which is scheduled to take place at 9:00 on Sunday, 2nd of October 2011, at the Kuwait Conference Room, EMRO/WHO, Nasr City, a number of distinguished figures in health will be honoured. The Executive Board have decided to award the Dr A.T. Shousha Foundation prize for 2011 to Professor Doctor Amjad Dawoud NIAZI, from Iraq for his substantial contribution to public health in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. Dr Alireza Ansari Muqaddam, from the Islamic Republic of Iran, will be also honoured for his contribution in the area of cancer control and treatment.

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