

Dubai, 29 January 2013 – Under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, ministers of health and high-level representatives from 22 countries will meet in Dubai on 29-30 January to agree approaches to saving the lives of mothers and children: accelerating progress towards achieving MDGs 4 and 5 in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

The first meeting of its kind, the event is being co-organized by the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA).

Participants will be greeted with a keynote speech from UN Messenger of Peace and Chairperson of Dubai Healthcare City Authority HRH Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein, wife of HH Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum. Representatives from non-governmental organizations and the donor community will also attend.

In 2000, world leaders set global goals for improving maternal and child health – Millennium Development Goals 4 and 5. In 2010, five years away from the MDG deadline, countries around the world rallied around the UN Secretary-General's Strategy for Women's and Children's Health. The strategy aims to accelerate progress on the health MDGs, particularly MDGs 4 and 5 (reduction of infant mortality and improvement of maternal health respectively) - goals on which progress had been slowest.

Countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region have taken steps to meet these goals. Some Member States have made impressive achievements, but in others too many mothers and children continue to die. As a result, the average annual reduction rates for maternal and child mortality in the region rank among the lowest in the world. Between 1990 and 2010, maternal mortality was reduced by 2.6% annually, and under-five mortality fell by just 2% per year.

It is estimated that 923 000 children under five years old and around 39 000 women of childbearing age still die in the region every year. The vast majority of these deaths can be prevented with proven, cost-effective solutions. The meeting aims to ensure that more women and children in the region have access to these solutions.

The World Health Organization recommends that all women should have access to antenatal care in pregnancy, skilled care during childbirth, and care and support in the weeks after childbirth.

WHO also stresses the importance of all births being attended by skilled health professionals: timely management and treatment can make the difference between life and death.

A child's risk of dying is highest the first 28 days of life. WHO emphasizes the importance of safe childbirth and effective neonatal care and taking steps (including vaccination) to prevent diseases such as pneumonia and diarrhoea (two of the main killers of children under five), as well as improving nutrition. Malnutrition is the underlying contributing factor in over one third of all child deaths, making children more vulnerable to severe diseases. Interventions to tackle these issues are included in the package: "Essential interventions, Commodities and Guidelines for Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn and Child Health", launched in 2011 by WHO and Aga Khan University, developed in collaboration with UNFPA, UNICEF and other partners.

The Dubai meeting will pay particular attention to the situation in ten priority high burden countries identified under the United Nations Secretary General's Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health: Afghanistan, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, Pakistan, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Yemen. These countries have been working with WHO, UNICEF and UNFPA to develop plans for scaling up action for discussion during the meeting. The plans will look at realistic scenarios of progress which can be put in place between now and 2015, and the resources needed to execute them.

Participants are expected to make individual commitments to improve coverage of maternal and child health interventions and services. The meeting will conclude with a Dubai Declaration on Maternal and Child Health in the Eastern Mediterranean region.

Afghanistan, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen will all be represented at the High-level meeting.

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