

Monday, 28 October 2013, Muscat, Oman – The WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean commenced its working sessions this morning in the Omani capital, Muscat, with a review of the Regional Director’s annual report for 2012, submitted by Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean. Dr Mohammed bin Ahmed al-Saidi, Minister of Health, Oman, was elected Chair of the 60th session.

On the request of Member States, polio eradication was also included in the agenda today. Dr Bruce Aylward, Assistant Director-General for Polio and Emergencies, presented a paper on urgent action to address the escalating polio emergency that now threatens all countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. The paper reviewed the situation of polio in both Pakistan and Afghanistan, the two remaining countries in the Region where poliovirus is still endemic, as well as in Somalia and the Syrian Arab Republic where outbreaks of the virus have occurred. The paper noted that all countries in the Region are vulnerable to the emergence of imported cases of polio infections. During the discussions on this issue, the Regional Committee listened to a description of the health conditions in the Syrian Arab Republic in light of the crisis there. The Syrian Minister of Health emphasized that the current crisis had affected the formerly very strong health system, particularly in regard to the health personnel, equipment and devices.

The sixtieth session of the Regional Committee was officially inaugurated on Sunday evening at the Bustan Palace Hotel, under the patronage of His Highness Haitham bin Tariq Al Said, Minister of Heritage and Culture, and in the presence of Her Royal Highness Princess Muna Al-Hussein of Jordan, ministers of health in the Region and other ministers in Oman, and in front of a large gathering.

During the opening, Dr Abdul Latif Mekki, Minister of Health, Tunisia, Vice-Chair of the 59th session, stressed that the past year had seen the implementation of important health events whose positive outcomes were now being seen. He mentioned in particular the high-level meeting, held in Dubai earlier this year on saving the lives of mothers and children, in which most of the countries had participated. In particular the countries with a high burden of maternal and child mortality had committed themselves to reducing such mortality.

In his opening speech, Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, praised the advances that Oman has made in health and social development over the past four decades, through its sustained commitment to health and social development and careful planning. “The excellent collaboration between WHO and Oman is a model that we aim for with all Member States, and I extend my particular appreciation to Oman for this admirable

achievement”, Dr Alwan said.

The Regional Director highlighted a number of key health issues, such as strengthening of health systems, universal health coverage, maternal and child health, the International Health Regulations (2005), polio, noncommunicable diseases and the challenges faced by the Region regarding the health and the environment.

“During this 60th session of the Regional Committee, we will be reviewing with you what we have collectively achieved so far in the past year, as well as seeking your guidance on what else we need to do, where we should be focusing our efforts and continuing the dialogue on what we need to do together to improve public health in our region,” he said.

The gathering then listened to a keynote speech from HRH Princess Muna Al-Hussein, WHO Patron of Nursing and Midwifery in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, during which she stressed the importance of strengthening public health by through making health promotion a priority, along with the control of diseases. She called upon health leaders to lead change in the way governments are moving towards health and change in the interaction between different sectors to achieve better health and happiness among communities and citizens. She also touched upon noncommunicable diseases and noted the importance of bringing about real change in health promotion and of encouraging healthy lifestyles. Addressing the health workforce crisis in the Region, she stated that universal health coverage could not be achieved without an effective workforce.

Dr Mohammed bin Ahmed Al Saidi, Minister of Health of Oman, concluded the opening ceremony, noting that that the meeting was taking place amid significant variables on the health level, and with several health issues emerging as priorities. This made it obligatory for all of us to do more for the health of our communities. There was an urgent need for more commitment especially with the profound political, social and economic changes in a number of countries in the Region. "The past two years have revealed the huge differences in the response of health systems, and the need to take urgent measures to bridge the gaps. Strengthening health systems and making them more efficient is one of the fundamental strategies to promote comprehensive development”, he said.

Dr Saidi also announced a contribution of US\$ 5 million from Oman to support the efforts to eradicate polio.

The first working session on Monday saw a video message to the Regional Committee from Dr. Margaret Chan, WHO Director-General, who thanked the Government of Oman for hosting the session. She noted that many visitors to Oman come to learn about the country's health system and the remarkable results it had produced. One of the most encouraging trends in public health today was the growing number of countries that had made universal health coverage their goal. This was a strong endorsement of the need for fairness in access to quality health care. Universal health coverage also stressed the need for a comprehensive range of services, including prevention. This emphasis on prevention was critically important as the Region addressed its growing burden of noncommunicable diseases. The UN Political Declaration on Noncommunicable Diseases clearly stated that prevention must be the cornerstone of the global response to these diseases.

Members of the Regional Committee continue their discussions on other issues including the international plan of action for the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases, the launch of the World Health Report 2013 on the importance of research for universal health coverage, and a side event to launch a regional initiative to end the HIV treatment crisis.

The Regional Committee will also listen to the views of the Chief Editor of international medical journal The Lancet, Richard Horton, on public health in the Region.

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