

24 March, Cairo – On the occasion of World TB Day, Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, urges all partners to work together to fight tuberculosis (TB). “We know what to do, we know we can defeat tuberculosis, we know we can save unnecessary suffering caused by tuberculosis in our countries. With this conviction, let us commit ourselves to do better, and more, in our fight against tuberculosis.”

World TB Day is commemorated every year on 24 March. It celebrates the discovery of the tuberculosis bacilli and serves as a reminder that TB continues to be the cause of suffering of millions worldwide. This year, TB Day will be celebrated across the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region with the slogan “Stop TB in My Lifetime”. The slogan is part of a two-year global campaign by the Stop TB Partnership which aims at promoting bold actions and an ambitious approach towards TB control.

Despite appreciable progress made against TB by the global health community, more than 8.7 million new patients were diagnosed with TB and about 1.4 million people died because of it in 2011 alone. Multidrug-resistant tuberculosis, or MDR-TB, is yet another challenging aspect of the global efforts in TB control. Dr Margaret Chan, WHO Director-General, recently said, “We are treading water at a time when we desperately need to scale up our response to MDR-TB”. “We have gained a lot of ground in TB control through international collaboration, but it can easily be lost if we do not act now.”

In the past decade, the Eastern Mediterranean Region, which includes countries from southwest Asia to north Africa, has witnessed some progress in TB control. The case detection rate increased from 50% to 62% during the period between 1990 and 2011. The treatment success rate has reached an impressive 88%. However, there are still many challenges in the regional response to TB. Countries in the Region are still unable to detect all TB cases. Only 4.6% of MDR-TB patients were provided treatment services in previous years. Several countries in the Region are experiencing conflicts, natural disasters and unstable security conditions, making TB care more complex and challenging. This shows that the fight against TB is far from over.

TB control programmes, nongovernmental organizations, patient associations and other civil society groups have chalked out elaborate programmes to celebrate TB Day across the Region. WHO country offices are working together with organizers of TB Day activities to draw the attention of political leadership towards TB, raise public awareness on the disease and reiterate commitment to supporting TB patients and their families.

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