Scaling up epidemic readiness in Syria pays off as humanitarian crisis worsens

In 2013, the humanitarian crisis in Syria posed a grave and acute risk to public health in other countries in the Region affected by the crisis. As the influx of Syrian refugees continued to pour into neighbouring countries owing to the conflict, national health systems were stretched to their limits.

With thousands of Syrians crossing the border each day, not only was there a potential risk of introducing diseases prevalent inside Syria to neighbouring countries but also mounting fear that failing health systems and disruption of regular public health programmes in Syria may lead to outbreaks in the neighbouring countries of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt as a result of population movement and overstretched health services.

By June 2013, according to UNHCR sources, the number of registered Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries exceeded 1.8 million and the situation was viewed as one of the worst humanitarian crises and conflicts the world had seen in decades. In view of an anticipated risk to public health, the WHO Regional Office continued to support national health authorities of these affected countries to scale up epidemic preparedness and readiness measures. As part of these measures, epidemic risk assessment was conducted, training for front-line health care workers conducted on management of outbreaks, an early warning surveillance system for detecting outbreaks was established and rapidly scaled up, and country capacities for diagnosis and detection of infectious diseases was enhanced.

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