

22 December 2020, Damascus, Syria – Dr Akjemal Magtymova, WHO Representative in Syria, along with Dr Ahmad Khleifawi, Syrian Deputy Minister of Health, chaired a meeting for national and international health sector partners to review the findings of the recent Intra-Action Review (IAR) meeting, improve the current strategies and strengthen the collective response to COVID-19.

Earlier in December 2020, WHO and the Ministry of Health organized a multisectoral IAR meeting to identify best practices, gaps and challenges in addressing the COVID-19 emergency in Syria. The 3-day meeting provided a unique platform to discuss major COVID-19 response pillars and established a base for strengthening the health security.

The response in conflict-affected Syria with disrupted health systems posed special challenges to the COVID-19 response. Highlighting the negative impact of COVID-19 on the lives and livelihoods of individuals, as well as the economy, Dr Akjemal stated in her opening remarks that “focusing on strengthening testing and treatment capacities constitutes response priorities in Syria.” She added that existing strategies should be constantly updated to adapt to the changing epidemiological situation. While acknowledging the tremendous efforts the Syrian Ministry of Health has made amid the unprecedented COVID-19 emergency and substantive contributions of partners, Dr Akjemal expressed her appreciation and commended “the selfless work of the dedicated individuals and teams who have worked so diligently to strengthen the health system for COVID-19 response.”

Dr Khleifawi underlined the many challenges the country has been experiencing, including the fragile health system, which has been severely affected by the prolonged Syrian crisis, the limited testing capacity across Syria, and most importantly the efforts towards obtaining the COVID-19 vaccines supported by WHO, UNICEF and the GAVI - the Vaccine Alliance, Syria being an eligible country for COVAX vaccine support.

“The appearance of new variants of the virus requires more cooperation to enhance the national response,” voiced Dr Khleifawi. “However, amid our protracted efforts, we stress the importance of ensuring a continuum of education, enhancing laboratory capacity, as well as safe and timely delivery of COVID-19 vaccines,” said Dr Khleifawi.

The Health Sector Coordination team identified milestones, challenges and best practices in the

COVID-19 emergency response core capacities, including surveillance, infection prevention and control, case management, national laboratories, risk communication and community engagement, as well as points of entry to ensure nationwide disease preparedness and response.

The meeting concluded with a call on humanitarian agencies to take stock of the accomplishments achieved and focus on the areas to strengthen in the coming months while prioritizing these activities and reflecting them in the 2021 national response plan.

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