

*Your Excellency, Dr Hassan Al-Gabbash, Minister of Health of the Syrian Arab Republic,*

*My colleague, UNICEF Representative, acting UN Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator, Mr Viktor Bo,*

*Your Excellency, Mr Hafizur Rahman Ambassador of India to the Syrian Arab Republic,*

*Ambassador Mr Milad Atiah, Ministry of Foreign Affairs*

*Representatives from international and national organizations, United Nations, dignitaries, media, ladies and gentlemen.*

At the beginning of 2020, the world woke up to the new reality. Nobody thought that the new pandemic will re-emerge again, after the last deadliest pandemic caused by influenza H1N1 virus that lasted for 2 years from 1918, taking 50 million lives and infecting 500 million people. A hundred years later, with all the social advancement, economic growth and all the knowledge we have acquired, we were not ready to face the coronavirus pandemic.

Today over 142 million COVID-19 confirmed cases. We have lost over 3 million lives in just a year. Economic collapse is staggering. Millions of people across the globe lost livelihoods. COVID-19 touched every country and every family; and the virus continues to spread in its various forms, affecting younger and stronger population.

This pandemic happened when the world community was shifting its attention to the noncommunicable diseases (NCDs). In fact, due to the high NCDs burden, people with co-morbid conditions were the first victims of the COVID-19, those who suffered from diabetes,

cardiovascular diseases, chronic respiratory diseases.

COVID-19 has taken lives indiscriminately, women, men. The frontline health workers – those who saved many lives in this battle – continue carrying the highest risk of COVID-19 transmission and continue to be on a call of duty often risking their lives.

Now it all the more important for health workers to be vaccinated first.

In Syria, as well as across the globe, WHO strongly recommends vaccinating this high-risk group first for them to be protected so they can continue saving the lives of the rest of the society. This is in line with the recommendations of the WHO's strategic advisory group of experts on immunization for vaccine prioritization.

While the global scientific community and international entities have made extraordinary efforts to develop and mass produce vaccines, the vaccines remain a precious commodity.

There are currently hundreds of vaccine candidates in different stages of trial, when the prerequisites stages are completed, the vaccines dossiers are submitted to WHO for review and approval for Emergency Use Listing. Currently, there are 19 vaccines under WHO review, and only 4 have been approved after stringent review. AstraZeneca is one of the vaccines approved by WHO, and made available by the COVAX facility under the advanced market commitment to the widest number of countries.

Everyone contributes to the fight against COVID-19. There is a role for every single individual and each of us to stop the pandemic.

There are unprecedented efforts for vaccine production. Yet the vaccine quantities produced are still not sufficient for the entire humanity and access to it gets prioritized, vaccine equity remaining the main concern. We are hoping that in collaboration with COVAX, GAVI, UNICEF, we will be able to secure more vaccines to meet the National Deployment and Vaccination Plan for Syria and contribute towards global combat against COVID-19.

I am grateful for all the member states and governments who are behind this global initiative and committed extraordinary financial back up for accelerated development and distribution that aims for equity and availability across the globe.

I would like to thank the Indian Government for its generosity in allocating February 2021 lot of vaccines to Syria and sending 203,000 doses of precious vaccines for people of Syria. I am thankful for His Excellency Indian Ambassador for his presence today at this ceremony.

The government of Syria, the Ministry of Health of the Syrian Arab Republic planned for months together with WHO and UNICEF, methodically writing NDVP and thoughtfully creating microplans for equitable distribution of vaccines across all its governorates. The Syrian National vaccination platform is one of the strongest public health programmes in the Region. This platform and its institutional memory serve best the purpose for rolling out the COVID-19 vaccine.

Nothing is easy and the road ahead is not without a challenge. But with determination, solidarity and joining efforts for local implementation of the immunization in each setting in Syria, we should be able to make the best use of available vaccines - best public health intervention to curb ongoing pandemic and save lives.

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