

Ladies and gentlemen,

“Save Lives. Make hospitals safe in emergencies” is the theme of this year’s World Health Day campaign.

Why should we invest in safe health facilities in emergencies?

WHO’s Eastern Mediterranean Region is home to some of today’s most intractable crises. Natural disasters, conflicts and other emergencies continue to affect populations across the region, putting the health services under extensive strain.

Ladies and Gentlemen

We are all still living the tragedy of Gaza and the catastrophe resulting from the destruction of the health facilities there. This is a violation of international law and should be considered a war crime and a grave crime against health. We also still remember the earthquake that hit Pakistan in October 2005. In a few seconds, out of 796 health facilities ranging from sophisticated hospitals to rural clinics, 388 were completely destroyed. The remaining facilities that were able to continue functioning were utterly overwhelmed. The health care workforce was also severely affected by this event.

In the past five years, over 800 health facilities were partially or fully damaged from several events within the region. They were earthquakes in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan, conflict in Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine, a cyclone in Oman and floods in Yemen. Natural disasters and all sort of emergencies can affect anyone, anywhere.

Although climate change and the subsequent warming of the planet may be gradual, the increasing frequency and severity of extreme weather events—intense storms, heat waves, drought and floods—will be abrupt and the health consequences will be acutely felt.

Health facilities are about more than just bricks and mortar. In addition to their physical structure, health facilities must have the functionality to continue providing services throughout and after the events in order to save lives. Functional collapse, not structural damage, is the usual reason for hospitals being put out of service during disasters.

A crisis happens when it is least expected, and we know that disasters can hit at any time. Saving lives can only be achieved if proper investments are made in emergency preparedness and training of the health workforce. Hospital failure and health system disruption during emergencies is as often due to system overload and lack of contingency planning as of physical failure. Staff training is just as important as physical protection.

Incorporating comprehensive disaster protection for earthquakes and extreme weather events into new building designs adds only an additional 4% to total costs. We must remember that when a hospital is out of service, many thousands of people are left without health care. In the long run, disruption of essential health services affects a country's development potential.

Don't let health facilities be another victim of emergencies.

Thank you.

Dr Hussein A. Gezairy, Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean

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