

# Oman's experience in malaria eradication hailed at WHO meet



## By A Staff Reporter

MUSCAT — Oman's success in malaria eradication was praised at a meeting of National Malaria Programme Managers hosted by the World Health Organisation (WHO) at the Crowne Plaza Hotel yesterday.

Dr Hussein A Gezairy, WHO's Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean Region, praised the government's "hard work" in rolling back malaria in the Sultanate.

"Malaria was highly endemic in Oman until recently; in the 1980s around 300,000 clinical cases of the disease were recorded each year. A malaria eradication policy was adopted in 1991, and following the strong political support and a great deal of hard work and dedication, the situation improved radically and local

transmission is now interrupted," Dr Gezairy stated.

Around 80 delegates from countries in Europe, Africa and South East Asia are attending the five-day conference, which is reviewing national and regional strategies in combating malaria. A number of international and regional partner organisations, such as Unicef and Oxfam, are represented as well.

Saif al Rawahy, Under-Secretary for Finance and Administrative Affairs at the Ministry of Health, inaugurated the meeting. Oman's experience in bringing down malaria from 32,000 local cases in 1990 to zero-incidence in 2001 was outlined by Dr Salim bin Said al Wahaiby, Director of Environmental Health and Malaria Eradication.

Globally, malaria represents the most pressing health problem to social and economic

development, according to WHO. Malaria keeps the poor people poor and is a major cause of inequity in the world. In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, an estimated 15 million cases of malaria occur annually, killing 47,000 people every year.

Roll Back Malaria (RBM) was initiated in 1998 as a global partnership with the goal of halving the global malaria burden by 2010. The UN General Assembly has declared 2001-2010 the 'Decade to Roll Back Malaria in developing countries, particularly in Africa', reflecting the significance of malaria as one of the major infectious disease problems of the 20th century.

According to Dr Gezairy, the 'malaria growth penalty' is as high as 1.3 per cent of economic growth per annum in African countries south of the Sahara. Thus, malaria con-

tributes to an ever-widening gap in prosperity between the malaria-endemic and the malaria-free world.

Malaria affects primarily impoverished, disadvantaged countries — almost 60 per cent of all malaria deaths are concentrated among the poorest 20 per cent of the world's people, the highest association of any disease in any category with poverty.

Stressing the need for concerted action against the scourge, he said: "We now face the challenge of mobilising a

global effort to take these evidence-based approaches to full scale. The creation of a Global Fund for Aids, tuberculosis and malaria represents an enormous challenge for WHO in supporting countries to develop and implement evidence-based plans to roll back malaria."

Effective control measures, intervention tools and access to effective treatment will be discussed at the Muscat forum. "We have effective tools to reduce the risk of exposure, namely insecticide-treated materials, such as nets and curtains, and selective use of indoor residual spraying. Presumptive intermittent treatment in pregnancy and early access to effective treatment greatly reduce the impact of the disease," Dr Gezairy remarked.