



Dr Joachim Seybold, visiting expert and Deputy Director of International Affairs at Charité University Hospital of Berlin, checks a patient monitor at Shariati hospital in Tehran. Photo: WHO/Islamic Republic of Iran. Photo:WHO/Islamic Republic of Iran.

23 December 2021 – During a recent visit to the Islamic Republic of Iran facilitated by the World Health Organization (WHO), a team of experts from the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) of Germany met with national health authorities and professionals in order to analyse the ongoing in-country response to COVID-19 and share experiences and best practices through reviewing achievements, identifying challenges, laying down recommendations, and assessing potential areas of cooperation.

The six-day mission, which began on 22 November, was headed by Dr Andreas Jansen, Director of the Information Center for International Health Protection at RKI, and aimed to assess Iran's COVID-19 response performance in the three pillars of in-country surveillance, case investigation and contact tracing, and case management and infection prevention and control, and to provide recommendations on how to improve them for the current and future emergencies.

At the first meeting of the mission with Health Minister Dr Bahram Eynollahi, the German ambassador to Tehran, Mr Hans-Udo Mutzel, Director-General of the Ministry of Health and Medical Education's International Relations Department (IRD), Dr Mohammad Hossein Niknam, officials from Iranian Center for Infectious Diseases Control (CDC), and WHO professionals, WHO Representative Dr Syed Jaffar Hussain provided a briefing on the country's current situation in terms of the COVID-19 response, strengths of the treatment and research system, and gaps in the health and laboratory infrastructures, especially in genome sequencing.

“Iran has relied on local capabilities and domestic solutions to manage the COVID-19 crisis due to the isolation brought on by unilateral sanctions,” he said, and stressed the need to improve strategic and practical ways to complement local expertise and the need for specialized training.

“It is important to foster cooperation between managers at the national level and academia, exchange knowledge and experiences, and communicate with international counterparts,” he underlined.



RKI team sit at a meeting with Health Minister Dr Bahram Eynollahi, German ambassador to Tehran Mr Hans-Udo Mutzel, and WHO Representative Dr Syed Jaffar Hussain. Photo: WHO/ Islamic Republic of Iran.

Dr Eynollahi referred to a number of concerns regarding the COVID-19 response in the country despite the good national performance over the recent months. “The recent flare-up of COVID-19 in other countries has concerned us about the future of the epidemic,” he expressed. “Up until a few months back in Iran, 50,000 new COVID-19 patients were identified daily in the country, where a daily toll of 700 deaths were reported in one day, but by stepping up vaccination efforts and public participation, the situation in Iran has improved today.”

The Minister also took stock of the good health and medical facilities in Iran, including about 1000 hospitals, 20,000 medical faculty members and 150,000 hospital beds in the country, and the ongoing development of five local vaccines against COVID-19.

Dr Jansen last visited the Islamic Republic of Iran in the spring of 2020 along with WHO representatives, when they witnessed the great efforts of health care staff to control COVID-19.

Dr Niknam and Dr Gouya pointed to the commonalities between the two countries in the high number of COVID-19 cases and expressed enthusiasm for possible areas of bilateral collaboration. “The role of WHO country office in Iran in facilitating this mission and other mutual collaborations cannot be denied,” added Dr Gouya, Director of CDC.

“Considering the similar situation that Germany is facing, bilateral cooperation and sharing experiences can be instrumental to deal with this pandemic, and a comprehensive collaboration is very much needed,” agreed Dr Jensen, noting that the main focus of his team is to study areas of infection control within the national health care system, particularly antibiotic resistance, where long-term joint projects can be developed and implemented.



RKI team are briefed on the surveillance system at a primary health care facility in Tehran
Photo: WHO/ Islamic Republic of Iran.

Over several meetings between RKI and the Ministry of Health and Medical Education and affiliated centres, the visiting experts were briefed on measures taken in infection prevention and control in the country. Among the challenges discussed were access to quality supplies (e.g. antibiotics, different mediums, reagents, and consumables), participation in quality assessment programmes, updating of analytical systems including software, provision of training for new technologies in the field, and providing support to the antimicrobial resistance surveillance programme. The team also visited various hospitals, primary health care centres and health research organizations in the provinces of Tehran and Isfahan.



WHO EMRO | National COVID-19 response assessed in Robert Koch Institute visit to Islamic Republic of Iran