23 January 2024, Geneva – The WHO Executive Board, currently holding its 154th session in Geneva, has appointed Dr Hanan Balkhy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean. This follows her nomination by the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean on 10 October 2023.

Dr Balkhy takes up her appointment on 1 February 2024, for a term of 5 years. She will be the first woman to become WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean.

In her acceptance speech, Dr Balkhy mentioned the many challenges the world is experiencing – all of which have significant implications for health. As well as shifting global geopolitics and the rising number and frequency of emergencies, exacerbated by severe climate events, there

are lessons that cannot be ignored as the world emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic.

“These challenges underscore the undeniable interconnection between health and climate, and emphasize that every humanitarian crisis is, at its core, a health crisis,” she said.

Dr Balkhy noted that without peace, achieving health goals remains a distant prospect, and will require effective health diplomacy and renewed commitment on both global and local fronts.

She also noted that the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region is diverse, with strong economies and stable settings alongside high levels of fragility, large displaced populations and a high share of the global population in need of humanitarian aid – not least in Sudan and the occupied Palestinian territory.

“Against this backdrop, ensuring the enjoyment of Health for All requires innovative and forward-looking approaches, backed by evidence,” said Dr Balkhy.

The incoming Regional Director highlighted the need to prioritize access to and investment in well-functioning and resilient health systems. She spoke of the key priorities and initiatives that

the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean will launch.

“My team will concentrate on 2 vital areas aligned with the Thirteenth General Programme of Work (GPW 13) and my 5 campaign priorities, anticipating the context of GPW 14,” said Dr Balkhy. “We aim to enhance end-to-end supply chains, ensuring essential medicines and supplies reach all populations, not an easy task for many in the Region.”

Dr Balkhy thanked the WHO Director-General, the Member States of the Eastern Mediterranean Region and the Executive Board for placing their trust in her. She pledged to work tirelessly towards the shared goal of Health for All. She also thanked outgoing Regional Director Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari for his thoughtful leadership during challenging times.

“To achieve our shared goal of Health for All, I seek continued partnership and pledge unwavering dedication to our collective endeavour,” said Dr Balkhy. “While WHO, as the leading global health agency, will play a critical role in achieving Health for All, we can only succeed by working together and in solidarity with each other.”

Notes to editors

Dr Hanan Balkhy was born in Saudi Arabia. She has served as Assistant Director-General for Antimicrobial Resistance at WHO headquarters since 2019.

Previously, Dr Balkhy had a distinguished career in medicine and in medical and health-related research, with a special focus on public health challenges.

Dr Balkhy has a strong background in public health at the national, regional and international levels. At the national level, she was the first Executive Director for Infection Prevention and Control at the Ministry of National Guard, Saudi Arabia.

For more than 10 years, she successfully led the Gulf Cooperation Council Centre for Infection Control and the WHO Collaborating Centre for Infection Prevention and Control and Antimicrobial Resistance in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. This experience culminated in her appointment as the first Assistant Director-General for Antimicrobial Resistance at WHO.

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