12 October 2023, Cairo, Egypt – The 70th session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean concluded today. RC70 took place amid a barrage of emergencies in the Region, including escalating hostilities and a deteriorating humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territory, increasing conflict in northwest Syria and successive earthquakes in Afghanistan. The impact of these events and the health needs of affected populations dominated discussions.

As RC70 drew to a close, the Members of the Regional Committee endorsed the 5-year report on implementing the strategic priorities of “Vision 2023: health for all by all – a call for solidarity and action”. The Regional Committee also passed significant decisions and resolutions on priority health issues, which will pave the way to translate these powerful words into effective policies and actions.

Member States this year nominated the next WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean: Dr Hanan Balkhy will be the first woman to lead the Organization’s health work across the 22 countries and territories of the Region, serving a population of 745 million people. The nomination will be submitted to the WHO Executive Board during its 154th session, taking place on 22–27 January 2024 in Geneva, Switzerland. The newly appointed Regional Director will take office on 1 February 2024.

After concluding his tenure, Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari will be known as Regional Director Emeritus, a title that the Regional Committee has granted in recognition of his outstanding leadership and contribution to regional and global public health.

Series of significant endorsements

RC70 discussions on a series of technical papers led the Regional Committee to pass various decisions and resolutions. It endorsed a regional framework for action on addressing noncommunicable (NCDs) in emergencies, which stresses the need to integrate NCDs into national emergency preparedness and response strategies and plans. Member States should also strengthen coordination and collaboration among all stakeholders, including civil society, to effectively prioritize NCDs in emergency efforts.

Another regional framework endorsed by the Regional Committee concerns the strengthening of public health readiness for mass gatherings in the Region. The resolution directs Member

States to enhance public health readiness for such events to minimize public health risks, and to integrate capacities developed during these events into longer-term health system strengthening activities.

The Regional Committee endorsed the call for action to enhance and scale up a fit-for purpose health workforce in the Region. Member States are urged to accelerate implementation of the existing regional framework for health workforce development, including by developing comprehensive and gender-sensitive strategic plans based on health labour market analysis and multisectoral policy dialogues, and by protecting and empowering the health workforce.

Climate change is currently among the biggest threats to global health, and health professionals in the Region are already responding to the health harms caused by this unfolding crisis. As the climate crisis intensifies, the Regional Committee endorsed a regional framework for action on climate and health. Member States are encouraged to prepare and implement national plans of action and to allocate adequate resources, as well as ensure health impact is included in all climate change programmes.

A forum for unity

Partners came together at RC70, united for a healthier future. Five regional directors of partner United Nations agencies joined in a panel discussion on the Regional Health Alliance, an initiative to speed up joint implementation of the health-related Sustainable Development Goals. This coincided with the launch of the latest progress report on the Region’s efforts to achieve these goals. It presents trends, challenges, and key actions to accelerate progress on the relevant targets by 2030.

Young people were the focus of a second panel discussion, on youth health and well-being. Beyond young people’s health needs, including in humanitarian settings, the panel members discussed ways to empower the leaders of tomorrow to engage in public health. The Regional Office’s initiative to establish a regional Youth Council is just one exciting new endeavour to amplify the voice and agency of young people in health matters. Everyone benefits when the next generation is inspired to participate and innovate.

RC70 included the 9th meeting of the Regional Subcommittee on Polio Eradication and Outbreaks, at which Global Polio Eradication Initiative partners recommitted to stay united to make polio history. Globally, wild poliovirus remains endemic only within 2 countries, which are in the Eastern Mediterranean Region: Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Next year’s session

Finally, the Regional Committee also decided on the location and dates for its 71st session. RC71 will be held in Doha, Qatar, from 14 to 17 October 2024.

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