Geneva, 10 December 2023

Dear colleagues, ladies, and gentlemen,

I would like to start by asking for a minute of silence in memory of our WHO colleague Dima Alhaj and all the humanitarian workers who have been killed in Gaza, some with several of their family members, over the past two months.

WHO's Eastern Mediterranean Region – plagued by some of the world's worst humanitarian emergencies – is home to almost 40% of all people in need of aid globally. People in our Region, the majority women and children, are some of the most vulnerable in the world, with too many deprived of their most basic human rights.

The escalating hostilities in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory have unleashed a profound humanitarian crisis.

As the bombardments continue, our team in Gaza says that hospital emergency departments look like battlefields, packed with people suffering from war wounds – including children with severe burns – and the floors covered in blood. Many people are dying of their injuries before they are even able to find a hospital that has the capacity or resources to save them.

Cases of infectious diseases are rapidly spreading, and people are on the brink of starvation, with reports of some households going for up to 24 hours without food or water.

Beyond the urgent need to end this horrific suffering, our Region may not be able to withstand further threats to its health security.

Countries affected by the spillover of hostilities, including Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, are already struggling to keep their health systems afloat and suffer from poor infrastructure and limited health resources. They cannot afford to be further challenged.

We are concerned about escalating hostilities in the West Bank, as well as in southern Lebanon near the border with Israel, which are leading to even more loss of life, injury, displacement, and damages to health infrastructure.

The current catastrophic situation – if not immediately halted – has the potential to further destabilize public health and place countless more lives at risk.

Only an immediate ceasefire can ultimately stop the suffering and prevent the health security of the entire Region from further spiraling downward.

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