19 December 2023

Thank you all for joining us.

This is my last media briefing before the year ends, and I am speaking to you today with the heaviest heart as I, like all of us here, witness unimaginable suffering.

Our region of over half a billion people is home to 38% of the global population in need of humanitarian aid, which means over 140 million.

These numbers represent the everyday tragedies experienced by the people of Syria, Afghanistan and Morocco after earthquakes, the lived horrors of the people of Libya after catastrophic flooding, drought in the Horn of Africa, rapidly worsening conflict in Sudan and, of course, the humanitarian crises in Gaza that continues to unfold with unprecedented brutality.

Last week, the WHO Executive Board held a special emergency session on the health situation in the occupied Palestinian territory at the request of 17 member states.

It was the first time since the conflict began that the international community reached consensus on the situation in Gaza, issuing a resolution that calls for immediate, sustained and unimpeded humanitarian aid.

Despite this and the continuous efforts of UN Security-General António Guterres and humanitarian actors around the world, the brutal violence is relentless and continues unabated. It is only possible to adequately respond to the needs of the people once this conflict comes to an immediate halt.

The WHO has consistently called for an immediate and permanent ceasefire.

WHO's Director General, Dr Tedros, has been warning for weeks that the living conditions and lack of health care could lead to more people dying from disease than bombs.

This risk has only intensified.

Not only have health care workers and facilities not been protected, but they have been subject to attacks, as seen most recently in the case of Kamal Adwan and the shelling of Naser Hospital in south Gaza.

On December 16, WHO staff took part in a joint UN mission to Al-Shifa Hospital, once a major referral centre of Gaza's healthcare system, to deliver health supplies.

Our staff described witnessing a "bloodbath" and the emergency unit strewn with patients on the floor.

For the first time, there are accounts of trucks with food being stopped by people before aid is delivered.

This had not happened until now and speaks to the hunger in Gaza.

A recent World Food Programme assessment says over 90% of households go to bed hungry and 63% spend an entire day without food.

I plead for humanity to prevail and reiterate WHO's call for protecting health care workers and humanitarian assistance in the area.

Circumventing the essential human right to health has huge repercussions for years to come and sets precedents of disregard for humanity itself.

Many people at Al-Shifa Hospital asked our team to tell the world what was happening in the hope that someone might soon ease their suffering.

But the messengers are also killed. I want to express my deepest condolences to the media community that has lost 64 members.

While the world bears witness to the tragedy in Gaza, recent events have added yet another layer of urgency to our collective concerns.

Drone attacks in the Red Sea, military planes over Beirut, and Israeli attacks on rural Damascus are deeply troubling developments. These incidents not only exacerbate the existing crises but also highlight the potential for a humanitarian catastrophe that could engulf the entire region.

At the same time, the people of Sudan, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, Syria, and Afghanistan, to name a few, are not forgotten by WHO.

We are extremely concerned about the rapidly worsening situation in Sudan, that is facing the biggest displacement of children anywhere in the world right now.

There is a staggering rise in the number of people displaced by conflict. About 300,000 people that had been sheltering in Al Gezirah state have been once again displaced since clashes erupted in the area on 15 December.

After eight months of worsening conflict, the health system is stretched to a breaking point. Health capacities are declining while the needs sharply rise.

Darfur, in the Western part of the country, is a catastrophic situation. International partners have access to those in need only through high-risk cross-border operations from Chad.

The health and humanitarian conditions in Al Gezirah state have starkly declined because of increased military operations. WHO's operations hub in the State's capital Wad Madani, which has been the backbone of the health response to Khartoum and surrounding states since the start of the conflict, has had to be temporarily suspended.

Millions of Sudanese face catastrophic levels of hunger, with nearly 17.7 million people across Sudan suffering from high levels of acute food insecurity and 4.9 million people on the brink of famine. The overall number of people estimated to be in need of humanitarian assistance in 2023 has escalated from 15.8 million to 24.7 million.

WHO will always remember the people it promises to serve in the worst of times and be by their side in the most challenging moments.

But to do our work, we need resources and safe access.

No one should bleed to death, and no one should die waiting for the few doctors remaining after too many have been killed.

While mass atrocities in Sudan have become a norm, Cholera, which can kill within hours, is raging across nine countries in our region, leaving children under five worst affected.

In Sudan alone, the deadly cholera outbreak has already spread to 9 of the country's eighteen states.

The cholera outbreak is highly alarming, to say the least.

Amidst this, it is encouraging to see that more than 130 countries signed the UAE Declaration on Climate and Health at COP28.

This is a ray of hope for countries in our region that bear the brunt of climatic catastrophes, as we have seen in Somalia, Libya and Pakistan in a little over a year.

As we close the year, my thoughts are with our colleagues from UNRWA.

I mourn the loss of the 135 UNRWA members just as I mourn our very own Dima Alhaj, who was killed along with her family, including her six-month-old baby.

All of them gave their lives in service to humanity and will always be in my prayers.

Amidst active combat, WHO staff, UN agencies, and all humanitarian actors, as well as the media, are doing everything in their capacity to come to the aid of people worst affected by conflict. I want to express my deepest thanks to all our staff on the ground for their inspiring dedication and humanity.

Despite the helplessness of our times, I insist on hope, and conclude with hopes for our region and its people to live a life of safety, dignity, and prosperity.

The Eastern Mediterranean Region deserves the compassion of the world and the global community to see the people of our region as people, not numbers that change on television screens. We need the countries in the Region, especially countries that are economically stable, such as our Gulf countries, to support other member states in their time of dire need.

Our people too, deserve a life of more than mere survival, a life where their human rights are upheld, our people too deserve to imagine a future for their children, and to sleep at night with some promise of a tomorrow.

I sincerely thank you all for your work and wish 2024 and the years to follow are better for the Region.

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