



Cairo, 10 October 2022 □ The 69th session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean was inaugurated today in Cairo by Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General; Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean; and H.E. Dr Ahmed Robleh Abdilleh, Minister of Health of Djibouti and Vice-chair of the 68th session of the Regional Committee. The inauguration was attended by ministers of health and representatives of the Region’s Member States, participating in person for the first time since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. They were joined by representatives of international, regional and national organizations.

The theme of this year’s session is “Reaching the Sustainable Development Goals in the post-COVID-19 age: accelerating universal health coverage and health security – Health for All by All”.

In his opening remarks to the ceremony, WHO Regional Director Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari cast a spotlight on the gravity of the situations impacting people’s lives in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, from multiple conflicts to the earthquake in Afghanistan, chronic and acute food insecurity in the Horn of Africa, floods in Pakistan and the recent cholera outbreak in the Syrian Arab Republic.

“These intersecting crises take a severe toll on people’s health, livelihoods and lives and make it even more difficult to achieve Health for All by All. Yet I know that if we focus firmly on what is possible, together we can make that vision a reality,” said Dr Al-Mandhari.

“Investing in resilience, prevention and preparedness is always difficult to prioritize because success is invisible: an effective system keeps us safe by stopping emergencies before they begin. But COVID-19 has shown the potential cost of not strengthening our systems. So we

need to recognize the value of timely investment rather than paying all too dearly later.”

Dr Ghebreyesus told participants in his opening address that the fact they are able to meet in person this year “is testament to how far you have all come in the fight against COVID-19.”

Though “the world has never been in a better position to end the COVID-19 pandemic as a global health emergency,” Dr Ghebreyesus cautioned that “we’re not at the end of the pandemic yet.”

Highlighting the vaccination gap, he urged Member States to prioritise the vaccination of health workers and older people and continue to work towards achieving the target of 70% coverage in all countries. Stressing that “we must maintain momentum on building a stronger architecture for health emergencies,” he appealed to “Member States to engage more actively in negotiating the new, legally binding international instrument on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response.”

He ended his remarks by drawing attention to peace, the “one essential medicine for good health that WHO cannot deliver.”

“And so I plead with all of you, in whatever way you can, to work for health for peace, and peace for health,” Dr Ghebreyesus concluded.

Addressing the inaugural session, Dr Abdilleh told participants that despite the world being taken by surprise by the COVID-19 pandemic which turned lives, societies and economies upside down, the response had included major investments in vaccines which were developed and distributed at unprecedented speed.

“We must now keep our focus and continue to work tirelessly towards universal health coverage. This is the only way to build our resilience to all kinds of crises,” said Dr Abdilleh.

He noted that, in the face of new and ongoing challenges “we need better preparation and effective coordination between Member States to build back a strong, resilient, flexible health care system that can adapt to sudden changes.”

Earlier in the day, Regional Committee delegates led by ministers of health, the WHO Director-General and WHO Regional Director, took part in a Walk the Talk event in Child’s Park opposite the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean.

WHO’s Walk the Talk is a global initiative to promote health, particularly physical activity, as an integral component of a sustainable future.

The event was attended by WHO employees, government and UN officials and diplomatic guests who listened to inspirational and motivational speeches. Many attendees then took part in a moderated physical exercise session.

Before the inaugural session, pre-RC technical meetings were convened. In addition to discussions of a range of health issues, including local vaccine production, cervical cancer elimination, road safety, emergency monitoring and hospital information systems, attendees also listened to three high-level guest speakers addressing important health topics – the challenges facing health leaders, climate change and COP27, and investment approaches to health.

Regular sessions of the 69th Regional Committee will start tomorrow morning.

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