9 October 2023, Cairo, Egypt The 70th session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean¬, also known as RC70, was inaugurated this evening in Cairo, Egypt. Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General, and Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, addressed delegates after the opening proceedings. Numerous ministers of health and other representatives of the Members of the Regional Committee were among the many dignitaries to attend the opening ceremony.

High-level officials from countries and territories of the Region also attend the Regional Committee, as do representatives of international, regional and national organizations. In line with the theme of RC70, we must all remain “United for a healthier future” to achieve the regional vision of Health for All by All. This year’s session of the Regional Committee coincides with the year-long celebration of WHO’s 75th anniversary.

In her opening remarks, Her Excellency Dr Mai Alkaila, Minister of Health of Palestine and Chair of RC69, who joined virtually, highlighted the fruitful deliberations of RC69 – last year’s session, which she chaired ¬– on key issues such as health security, the One Health approach, control of communicable diseases, promotion of health and well-being, and digital health. She also shared the regional perspective on the work of various intergovernmental processes mandated by the governing bodies of WHO.

“To move forward, we need to focus on the health of future generations,” she said. “Their health must have more weight in shaping our strategic directions. We must do this together, collectively, and by building on our previous successes.”

Opening his last Regional Committee as Regional Director, Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari expressed to delegates his sense of pride as he recalled the paths charted together, the hard times

navigated and the triumphs that have followed. “Your Excellencies, it has been the honour of my life to serve you and to serve with you. I think it is only human, though, to also reflect on the regrets, the work that remains and the challenges ahead. This is also essential if we are to proclaim that we have achieved Health for All by All.”

Explaining the impact of conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, Dr Al-Mandhari said that 2023 has been a reminder of how quickly health gains can evaporate in the face of conflict or natural disasters. “This is painful for all of us, especially for colleagues who serve in emergency settings,” he said. “But we stay and deliver and do so proudly – there is no room for backtracking.”

In his opening ceremony address, Director-General Dr Ghebreyesus began by expressing his deep concern over the conflict in the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel that erupted on Saturday. “This is the latest tragic chapter in a tragic story in which there are no winners,” he said. “WHO is doing what we can to support the health response, but this situation will not be solved with bullets and bombs; the only solution is dialogue, understanding and peace.”

“We are all painfully aware that this conflict is just one crisis in a region that has already suffered so much and continues to suffer so much,” Dr Ghebreyesus added.

On a positive note, Dr Ghebreyesus congratulated Egypt for achieving “gold tier” status on the path to elimination of hepatitis C as per WHO criteria. “Less than 10 years ago, Egypt had one of the highest prevalence rates of hepatitis C infection in the world. Thanks to political leadership from His Excellency President El-Sisi through the ‘100 million seha’ campaign, Egypt has reduced hepatitis C incidence by 97%. This is an incredible achievement, and it shows how major public health challenges can be overcome with the combination of political leadership and modern tools,” Dr Ghebreyesus said.

Earlier in the day, Regional Committee delegates, led by ministers of health, the Director-General and the 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 health promotion initiative to promote physical activity as an integral part of a healthy and sustainable future. Today’s event was attended by the WHO

champion and World Masters swimming champion Nagwa Ghorab, as well as members of the WHO workforce, government and United Nations officials, diplomatic guests and members of the media. Many attendees joined a walk around the park and took part in short exercise classes before listening to some inspirational and motivational speeches.

A pre-RC70 technical meeting was convened before the inaugural session. Attendees of the technical meeting discussed how to minimize morbidity and mortality due to trauma in the Region, by building better trauma care programmes; and the design and implementation of primary health care-oriented models of care in the Region, as a core component of reaching universal health coverage. National plans to strengthen country capacity for development and implementation of clinical practice and public health guidelines were also in focus, as was the need for an integrated approach to the growing threat of vector-borne diseases, to ensure better prevention, management and control. Also on the technical meeting agenda was the Regional Health Alliance and its role in speeding up joint implementation by United Nations agencies of the health-related Sustainable Development Goals.

The programme for the 70th session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean will begin tomorrow morning.

For more information, please contact:

Mona Yassin, Communications Officer, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean
Mobile: +20 10 06 01 92 84
Email: yassinm@who.int

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