

Cairo, Egypt, 21 March 2021- WHO's Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean is working with countries to safely prepare for mass gathering events in 2021 as part of its ongoing support to strengthen national capacities for prevention, detection, and response to the public health events, including COVID-19.

“Especially in the context of COVID-19, mass gathering events could trigger a rise in the number of cases, and introduce opportunities for public health risks to emerge,” said Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean. “These events provide an opportunity for WHO to work with countries to boost core capacities under the International Health Regulations across sectors and strengthen public health systems,” he added.

Different mass gathering events are anticipated to take place in a number of countries across the Region this year. Nowruz, the annual vernal equinox festival heralding spring, and the new year, is celebrated in several countries throughout the Region, including Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and Syria. Festivities often involve family and social gatherings, as well as excursions and activities outdoors.

National sporting events, such as football, cricket, and Buzkashi (a Central Asian horseback game), are scheduled throughout the year across the Region, with tournaments drawing significant numbers of spectators.

Mass gatherings associated with election events, such as national elections in Djibouti in April, will also require strict measures to reduce transmission risks.

Mass gatherings attracting larger crowds from around the world are also on the horizon this year. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is assessing its decisions for upcoming Umrah and Hajj pilgrimages, and UAE and Qatar are scheduled to host the Dubai Expo and the FIFA Arab Cup respectively later in the year, anticipating millions of visitors. Ashura and Arbaeen gatherings falling later in the year in Karbala, Iraq, also traditionally draw large international crowds.

In 2020, WHO worked with countries to make sure that proper risk assessments were conducted while planning mass gatherings. To ensure mass gatherings are held as safely as

possible, and prevent surges of COVID-19 cases during these events, WHO Regional Office will continue to assist countries in conducting risk assessments tailored for specific events, as well as operational planning and support to ensure that all participants and populations are protected.

This includes scaling up multisectoral coordination, disease surveillance systems and rapid response teams, testing capacity, contact tracing, isolation and quarantine, and, medical services, contingency planning and public communication as well as ensuring that all people are aware of the measures needed to protect themselves and each other, and know when to seek medical care.

“In 2020, efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 resulted in a number of mass gathering events being cancelled or taking place with reduced participation. This year, even with the rollout of vaccines, the pandemic is still a major public health crisis. Countries and populations, as well as visitors to mass gathering events, need to stay vigilant and alert,” stressed Dr Al-Mandhari.

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