WHO Regional Director Dr Hanan Balkhy meeting with HE Dr Bahram Eynollahi (2ndnd from right), Minister of Health and Medical Education of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

25 April 2024, Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran – Dr Hanan Balkhy concluded her first official visit to the Islamic Republic of Iran as the new WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, which took place on 12–15 April. She met with officials and partners to discuss WHO's work on the ground and how to strengthen collaborations and strategic initiatives to meet health needs.

The Regional Director's visit began in the historic city of Isfahan, where she visited Isfahan University of Medical Sciences and met with Chancellor Dr Shahin Shirani, who also heads the

Isfahan Academy of Medical Sciences. She also met with faculty members of the university and other Ministry of Health and Medical Education officials. Said Dr Balkhy: “It’s impressive to see how a quality integrated medical education has played a role in improving health services in the country, leading to higher life expectancy, lower mortality rates and wider vaccination coverage.”

With over 800 research centres, the Islamic Republic of Iran has made great efforts to expand its research capacity. Dr Balkhy visited Isfahan Cardiovascular Research Institute, one of 16 WHO collaborating centres in the country. The institute focuses on research, training and patient rehabilitation in the area of cardiovascular diseases. The country’s investment in evidence generation is building a knowledge base for the health workforce and strengthening health system resilience.

Dr Balkhy later met with Mr Stefan Priesner, United Nations (UN) Resident Coordinator, along with representatives of other UN agencies. In focus were the critical role of multisectoral collaboration in improving health, and the long-term socioeconomic benefits of preventive health measures. They considered how to improve advocacy for the critical work that the Islamic Republic of Iran does for the people of the country – including more than 5 million refugees and migrants. Also under discussion were areas to prioritize for collaborative work among UN agencies.

In a meeting between Dr Balkhy and the Minister of Health and Medical Education and his deputies, His Excellency Dr Bahram Eynollahi indicated that more than 96% of the population have health insurance. He also said that the country is committed to reinforce its primary health care network and family health programme; strengthen prevention and health promotion; and locally produce more than 92% of essential medicines. To build on such remarkable achievements, Dr Balkhy reiterated WHO’s support to the Iranian health system, especially on primary health care to advance universal health coverage.

Meeting with Her Excellency Dr Jamileh Alamolhoda, wife of the Iranian president, mental and psychological health were discussed as important aspects of public health alongside physical health. WHO will continue to work with Member States for the holistic health and well-being of their people.

His Excellency Mr Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, Minister of Foreign Affairs, met with Dr Balkhy to discuss issues related to health and diplomacy to reduce the burden of disease and create safer

communities. Among the topics discussed were the impact of sanctions on public health; cross-border transmission of infectious diseases, a challenge to which the influx of refugees has contributed; and implementation of health measures during annual mass gatherings, for which the Islamic Republic of Iran is keen to strengthen collaborations with the WHO to find and implement suitable solutions.

“In addition to our continued technical support to the country’s health system, we are ready to expand collaborations for the regional priorities, which include equitable access to medical supplies, empowering the health workforce and tackling substance use,” said Dr Balkhy.

The Regional Director expressed WHO’s support for multicountry partnerships including subregional collaboration between the Islamic Republic of Iran and neighbouring countries. “WHO would like to share the Islamic Republic of Iran’s valuable experiences in primary health care, family medicine, the local production of medical supplies, health insurance, and preventive health initiatives with other countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region and beyond,” she said.

Dr Balkhy’s visit to the Islamic Republic of Iran underscores the mutual commitment to address complex health challenges and to build bridges between countries for the well-being of populations especially during these challenging times when the Region is facing multiple emergencies and conflicts.

Selected photos from the mission

WHO Regional Director Dr Hanan Balkhy with Stefan Priesner, UN Resident Coordinator for the Islamic Republic of Iran.

More photos