



Cairo, 17 October 2013 - [The 60th session of the WHO Regional Committee](#) for the Eastern Mediterranean will be inaugurated on 27 October 2013 in Muscat, Oman. Functioning as WHO's governing body at the regional level, the Regional Committee consists of representatives of all Member States of the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

The meeting will address a range of important health issues representing priorities for the 22 countries of the Region. Participating in the discussions are Ministers of Health, representatives of national, regional and international organizations and agencies concerned with health, as well as experts from WHO headquarters and the Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean.

The opening session will be inaugurated by Mr Bahar Idris Abu Garda, Chair of the 59th session of the Regional Committee, Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, and Dr Ahmed Bin Mohamed Bin Obaid Al Saidi, Minister of Health of Oman, the host country. Her Royal Highness, Princess Muna Al-Hussein, WHO Patron of Nursing and Midwifery in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, will deliver the keynote speech during the opening session.

At the top of the Regional Committee agenda this year are a range of priority health issues in the Region. Maternal and child health is one of the issues for discussion by members of the Committee. According to the United Nations Interagency Group on Child Mortality Estimation (2012 report), the Region has several countries in which under-5 mortality rates are among the lowest in the world, ranging between 7 and 10 per 1000 live births. However, the pace of progress is slow in the rest of the Region, especially in the six countries which contribute to 82% of total under-5 deaths. As a result, the Region is unlikely to achieve the targets set for MDGs 4 and 5 by 2015 unless intensive and accelerated progress is made.

The Regional Committee will be also discussing the progress made in the development of core capacities for implementing the International Health Regulations (2005) (IHR) in States Parties in the Region. The Regulations are intended to rapidly identify and stop the emergence and spread of public health risks including emergency events. More work is needed by countries across the Region in the areas relating to mapping out of priority health risks and resources, effective response at points of entry, and mechanisms for the detection, alert and response to chemical emergencies.

Members of the Regional Committee will review the annual report of the Regional Director on the work of WHO in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, which highlights the collaborative work of the Regional Office and Member States during 2012.

The Regional Committee will also review the regional strategy for health and environment which aims to reduce the impact of environment-related hazards. . Environmental hazards are responsible for about 24% of the total burden of disease. The burden includes more than 1 million deaths and 38 million DALYs lost each year in the Region. In economic terms, these can be translated into an estimated annual loss of US\$ 144 billion. The main environmental risk factors prevailing in the Region include unsafe water and sanitation, indoor air pollution and exposures to chemicals and wastes. Women and children are the groups most affected.

Developments in polio eradication will also be reviewed. Epidemiologically, wild poliovirus (WPV) transmission is at lowest recorded levels ever, with fewer cases in fewer districts of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Region's remaining endemic countries. No cases due to WPV type 3 have been recorded anywhere since April 2012. However, these achievements are seriously threatened by security challenges that have been reducing access to children in several areas and that have claimed the lives of a considerable number of vaccinators, particularly in Pakistan. Some other countries are also at increasing risk of polio outbreaks.

The Regional Committee agenda also includes the subject of road safety. The Region accounts for 10% of the world's road traffic deaths and ranks second among WHO regions in terms of road traffic fatality rate (21.3 per 100 000 population) compared to a global rate of 18.03 per 100 000 population. Young males at their prime productive age of 15–44 years are at highest risk, with serious implications for national development.

The 60th session of the Regional Committee will address the key challenge of reaching universal health coverage in countries of the Region. Ensuring universal health coverage

requires reform of all health system building blocks, including enhancing access to essential medicine and technology, improving the quality of health services, strengthening health worker performance, establishing comprehensive health information systems, establishing fair financing mechanisms and creating harmonized strategies for health systems. Regional Committee members will discuss a roadmap to universal health coverage based on detailed country health system profiles developed by the Regional Office showing strong and weak points, opportunities and challenges as well as priorities for strengthening health systems.

Tobacco is still a multidimensional problem in the Region. One of the aspects of the problem reviewed by the Regional Committee is illicit tobacco trade.

The 60th session of the Regional Committee will also discuss strategies for prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases in light of the UN Political Declaration on Noncommunicable Diseases. A three-year review of the progress made by Member States in implementing the commitments of the UN Political Declaration is scheduled for the last quarter of 2014 at the UN General Assembly. Member States and WHO must plan ahead and work together, and with other regional and international partners, if they wish to make the progress needed.

The Committee will also review a number of other important health issues and topics, including decisions and resolutions of regional interest adopted by the World Health Assembly and Executive Board in their most recent sessions.

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