

## Ministers from the Region's Member States inaugurate the 59th session of the Regional Committee



Dr Ala Alwan, WHO  
Regional Director for the  
Eastern Mediterranean



The 59<sup>th</sup> session of the Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean will be inaugurated today at the premises of the Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, Cairo, Egypt.

This is the first session since Dr Ala Alwan assumed his duties as WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean in February 2012.

Functioning as WHO highest governing body at the regional level, the Regional Committee, which will be held on 1-4 October 2012, will address a number of significant health issues and topics. Participating in the discussions are Ministers of Health of Member States, their representatives, Dr Margaret Chan, WHO Director General, Dr Ala Alwan, Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, representatives of the 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.

Additionally, the Session will address a number of important health issues and topics, decisions and resolutions adopted by the World Health Assembly in its latest meeting.

### Actress HEND SABRI takes part in launching the regional initiative, "Towards the elimination of mother-to-child transmission of HIV"

Tomorrow, Tuesday 2 October 2012, will see the launching of the regional initiative "Towards the elimination of mother-to-child transmission of HIV" at 4:00pm. This initiative aims at enhancing HIV prevention through the control of its transmission during pregnancy and breastfeeding.



Prevention and treatment measures are widely available and need to be widely implemented. Participants in the event will include the Ministers of Health from the Region, WHO Director-General Dr Margaret Chan and WHO Regional Director Dr Ala Alwan. There will also be a recorded message from the Regional Director of UNICEF. In addition, the UNFPA Regional Director will attend and the UNAIDS Executive Director will be represented, along with representatives of the Regional Network of Women Living with HIV (Mena Rosa) and the Chair of the Technical Committee of the HIV Arab Initiative. Also attending will be Arab actress Hend Sabri, who was awarded the First WHO Regional Office Film Award for the Promotion of Human Rights in Health for her movie *Asmaa*. This event is open to the media.

## Polio eradication is now a global health emergency

The Committee will review progress in the eradication of poliomyelitis in the Eastern Mediterranean. WHO's Executive Board has declared that completing the eradication of poliomyelitis is a global public health emergency. Eradication of polio tops the regional priorities of the Eastern Mediterranean and the programme functions under direct supervision and instruction of the Regional Director. The



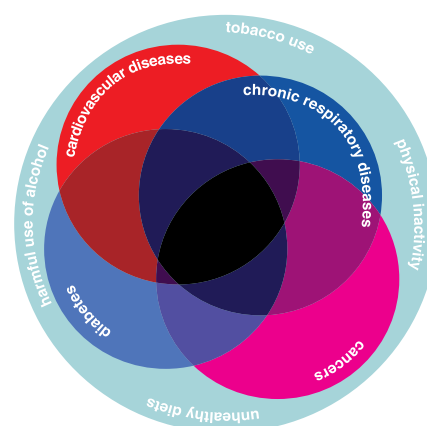
Emergency preparedness

Noncommunicable diseases

programme seeks to assist Afghanistan and Pakistan, the only two countries where polio cases are reported, in their efforts to prevent the transmission of the poliovirus, remove hindrances to immunization activities in certain provinces and contain the current foci and shelters of the virus.

## More than half the number of deaths in the world are caused by NCDs

Noncommunicable diseases, notably cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancers and chronic respiratory conditions, represent major causes of death. Globally, noncommunicable diseases alone cause more deaths than those caused by all other causes and they strike the populations of the developing communities the hardest. These diseases have reached epidemic levels. In the Eastern Mediterranean, noncommunicable diseases account for 53% of all deaths and this percentage may be as high as 80% in some countries in the Region. The Regional Committee will review strategies to prevent and control noncommunicable diseases including the Political Declaration adopted by heads of state and government during the UN General Assembly 66th Session.



## More than 40% of public places in the Eastern Mediterranean Region have “active smoking”

To guide the way towards tobacco control the Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean conducted many studies, including a pilot study on levels of indirect exposure to tobacco smoke in the Region conducted in collaboration with Member States and Institute for Global Tobacco Control 2010-2011. Findings of the study indicate that there is active smoking in more than 40% of the public places in capitals of the countries participating in the study. This highlights the dense spread of second-hand smoking and its grave effects on the health of smokers and non-smokers alike. A global study on the burden of disease related to indirect smoking published in 2011 found that more than 600 000 deaths occurred in 2004 globally due to exposure to indirect smoking. The Regional Office proposes a package of interventions to control smoking which will be discussed during the Regional Committee.



Maternal and  
child health

Communicable  
diseases

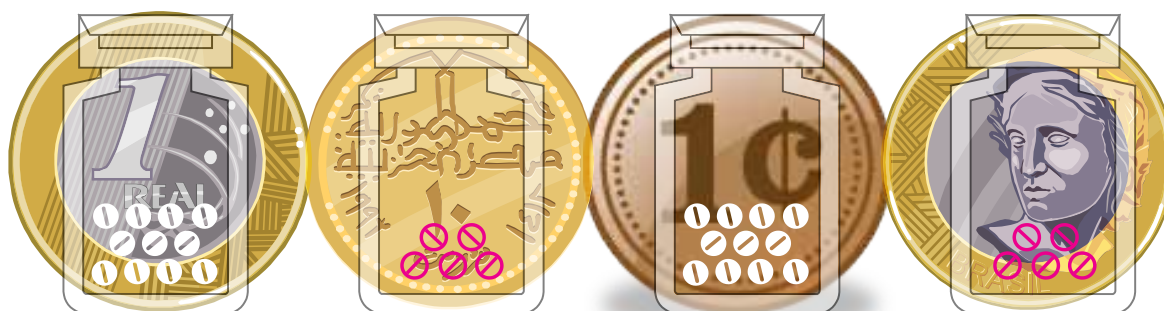
Health  
systems

## How much does a person get from government health expenditure?

Evidence shows there is significant disparity in health expenditure across the Region ranging between US\$ 1636 per capita annually in the highest tier countries and about US\$ 38 per capita in the lowest tier countries. Meanwhile, other countries struggle to improve the average health expenditure. The 59<sup>th</sup> Session of the RC will review a progress report on improving health care financing in the Region. A resolution adopted by WHO urges Member States to increase investment in health. Progress achieved is currently measured by assessing per capita total expenditure on health within the same country and across countries.

## Stronger health systems means less out-of-pocket expenditure

Strengthening health systems is one of the five strategic priorities identified by the Regional Office for the next five years. This priority is especially important as it directly relates to development and expansion of health care



services to cover all populations. A technical paper on this topic will be presented to the Regional Committee and will investigate obstacles and challenges with policy-makers in the Region, including the need to secure high-level political commitment to achieve universal health coverage, strengthening capacity of health ministries, reducing out-of-pocket expenditure, promoting the contribution of the private sector to public health and its regulation, preparing skilled workforce and approving practical models of family medicine practice. Members of the Committee will discuss means to strengthen health systems through seven interventions under consideration.

## Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

**Bad news: The Region has the 5 countries with the highest mother and child mortality rate**

**Good news: Child mortality rate has been reduced**

Of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) endorsed by 189 heads of government in 1990, three goals are health-related; Goal 4: To Reduce mortality of children under 5 by two thirds between 1990 and 2015; Goal 5: To reduce maternal mortality by three quarters between 1990 and 2015; Goal 6: To halt the spread of HIV/AIDS. A number of countries in the Region have succeeded, or almost succeeded, in achieving the three MDGs. However, some countries are lagging behind in realizing the goals. These are Afghanistan, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Pakistan, Morocco, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Yemen and the occupied Palestinian Territory. This Session will discuss the progress made towards realization of the MDGs in these countries.

## WHO reform in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

WHO's reform programme seeks to attract more active engagement and more informed participation by all Member States in governance processes, and to rebalance the way in which Member States exercise their role as informed and active participants in the work of the governing bodies.

Since his appointment in February 2012, the Regional Director has made clear his commitment to dynamic and effective management, to building a coordinated one-WHO response to global and regional health challenges, and to intersectoral approaches to major public health issues.

Based on the in-depth analysis of the challenges facing health development in the Region, five priority areas were identified in which WHO's capacity will be increased and technical support to Member States strengthened. The five areas are: health system strengthening; maternal, reproductive and child health and nutrition; noncommunicable diseases; communicable diseases; and emergency preparedness and response.

## International Health Regulations (IHR): requirements not met

Five years have elapsed since the International Health Regulations (IHR) entered into force on 15 June 2007; however no country has yet met all the requirements for full implementation of the IHR. Of the 23 countries in the Region, only 8 countries have achieved 70% of the technical capacity required to implement the IHR by 15 June 2012. A technical paper will be presented to the Session about the challenges encountered by countries during 5 years of implementation. The paper proposes strategies and procedures to advance IHR activities in the Region.

## Awardees and honorees

In the evening session a number of distinguished figures in health will be honoured. Dr. Mohamed Mohsen Ibrahim, Egypt, will be honoured for his significant contribution in the field of cardiovascular disease control. The Executive Board decided to award Dr. Ali Tawfiq Shousha Foundation Prize for 2012 to Dr. Sheikha Salem El-Arid, Bahrain. Also, Dr. Munira Abdullah Al-Hussein, Saudi Arabia, will be honoured for her contribution in paediatrics and for her support of children with Down syndrome and their families.