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**Address to the Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean, Sixty-first Session  
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Mr Chairman, honourable ministers, distinguished delegates, Dr Alwan, colleagues in health, UN agencies, ladies and gentlemen, let me sincerely thank the Government of Tunisia for hosting the 61<sup>st</sup> session of the Regional Committee.

This is not an easy time for the world, not for any country in any WHO region. Think about the headlines on nearly any given day.

Conflict. Senseless violence. Natural and man-made disasters. A changing climate. More and more antimicrobials failing.

Continuing sporadic cases in this region of MERS coronavirus. More and more chronic noncommunicable disease claiming lives way too young. And never far away, the constant threat from emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases.

In just the past few days, the volatile microbial world has delivered some sharp reminders of its power. Egypt confirmed a case of H5N1 avian influenza in an infant. Austria reported its first imported case of the MERS coronavirus.

The US confirmed its first Ebola case in a traveller from Liberia and then another case in a nurse who treated him. Infection in a second health-care worker was confirmed last Wednesday.

Spain likewise confirmed the first instance of Ebola transmission on its soil.

Meanwhile at the end of last month, more than 90 Ugandans, most of them hospital staff, are being monitored, in isolation, following the death on 28 September of a radiology technician from yet another horrific killer: Marburg haemorrhagic fever.

But let me begin with something positive.

Ministers of Health in this Region, I have to tell you, are fortunate. I am absolutely convinced that your Regional Director is leading you along the right path.

I would like to mention two paths in particular: the strong and consistent emphasis on strengthening basic health infrastructures, human resources for health and health information systems to achieve universal health coverage; the second, the need to complete the job of polio eradication, with that the world will be free of this horrific disease called polio.

As the whole world is seeing right now, very clearly, without fundamental public health infrastructures and services in place, no society is stable. No population is safe.

No country has the resilience to withstand the multiple shocks of the 21st century. The 21st century is a complex century in which we should expect to see the delivery with increasing frequency and force of surprises, surprises caused by extreme weather events in a changing climate, armed conflict or civil unrest, or a deadly and dreaded virus spreading out of control.

The Ebola outbreak that is ravaging parts of west Africa is going to get worse, far worse, before it gets any better. Health officials are still racing to catch up with this rapidly evolving outbreak that is constantly delivering surprises.

It has multiple dimensions that we have never seen in the 38-year history of this disease.

But let me tell you one positive story among so many heart-breaking ones.

When the Ebola virus was carried into Lagos, Nigeria, on 20 July, health officials all around the world trembled in anticipation of what was almost certain to be the start of the worst nightmare scenario anyone could imagine.

Lagos is Africa's most populous, fluid, and chaotic city, with a population of 23 million people constantly moving in and out.

Everyone expected a tremendous explosion of cases that would likely prove extremely difficult to control.

That never happened. In fact, tomorrow WHO will declare that the Ebola outbreak in Nigeria is over. The virus is gone. The outbreak was defeated. We sincerely congratulate Nigeria for this amazing achievement.

What accounts for this great news?

As we all know, the polio programme in Nigeria is running one of the world's most innovative polio eradication campaigns, using the very latest satellite-based cutting-edge technologies to ensure that no child is missed in that country.

The country is on track to eradicate wild poliovirus from its borders before the end of this year.

When the first Ebola case was confirmed in July, health officials in that country immediately repurposed polio technologies and the polio infrastructures to conduct Ebola case-finding and contact-tracing.

This is a good public health story with an unusual twist at the end.

For your information several countries have people right now in Nigeria. They are studying technologies, and I quote "made in Nigeria" with WHO support, to boost their contact tracing capacities should an imported case occur.

The story has another very clear message.

If Nigeria, also crippled by serious security problems, can do this – that is, eradicate polio and contain Ebola at the same time – any country in the world can do the same.

I am aware that your Regional Director will give you the latest information about the extremely serious polio situation in Pakistan.

For Ebola, the world is indeed admirably vigilant as witnessed by almost daily false alarms at airports and in emergency rooms, also in countries from this region.

But the world has a long way to go on preparedness.

Again, it is the same failure that concerns your Regional Director so deeply. Dr Alwan mentioned that the world is not prepared for all serious emergencies or outbreaks and many countries, 130 out of 194 countries have not fully implemented the core capacities required by the International Health Regulations.

I earnestly urge you to pay special attention in the next two years to fully implement the core capacities required by the International Health Regulations, especially at the weakest point in those core capacities, preparedness in airports, seaports and major points of entry .

In a highly interconnected world the movement of people makes it imperative that you are prepared. In global solidarity it is in our shared interest to make sure to support countries to achieve these core capacities.

During the Ebola outbreak, when presidents and prime ministers in non-affected countries make statements about Ebola, they rightly attribute the outbreak's unprecedented spread and severity to the "failure to put basic public health infrastructures in place."

And I fully agree with them. If you remember, I took office on 20 January 2007, and from my first day in office, I have stressed the critical need to strengthen health systems. More than eight years into this journey we are still talking about strengthening health systems. Surely without good health systems, and if we continue to neglect them, and they have been neglected for decades and decades, worldwide, population vulnerability to any kind of acute shock is increasing and is alarming.

I urge you and appeal to you to pay keen attention in your country to make sure that we work together to support you to build the health system capacity that is required to protect the health of the Region.

Let me thank you once again, thank you for your leadership and I thank the Regional Director, as I said, Dr Alwan is leading you down the right path and I urge you to continue to support him.