



*In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful*

**Address by**

**Dr ALA ALWAN**

**REGIONAL DIRECTOR**

**WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION**

**to the**

**TECHNICAL CONSULTATIVE MEETING ON NOVEL CORONAVIRUS**

**Cairo, Egypt, 14–15 January 2013**

Dear Colleagues, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to welcome you all to this consultative meeting on novel coronavirus. I wish to express my deep appreciation and sincere thanks to all of you for accepting our invitation and being present here today, despite very short notice. I am also delighted to see our colleagues from WHO headquarters, WHO collaborating centres and our partner agencies. Your presence today signifies the importance of this meeting for global health. We now need to evaluate where we are since this novel coronavirus first emerged on the global health stage in September last year. We also need to see what we should be doing collectively to protect public health from this threat.

Dear Colleagues,

You all know that the appearance of a novel coronavirus causing severe respiratory disease in September last year triggered a serious global health alert. The discovery of this new virus brought back memories of the SARS epidemic in 2003, as this virus belongs to the same family of coronaviruses that caused the SARS epidemic. Thus far, WHO has received reports of nine cases of human infection with novel coronavirus, five of whom have died. All the reported cases were severely ill.

Since the discovery of the novel coronavirus, WHO has deployed technical teams to provide technical support to affected Member States to investigate the event and collect available epidemiological, clinical and virological information related to the disease manifestation of the virus. The scientific community rapidly developed diagnostic tests and other assays and made them available to the countries that needed them. This collective work helped us to manage the public health risks associated with this virus in the initial days.

However, despite all of these global efforts, I must admit that our current global knowledge on the epidemiology and natural history of infection with this viral agent is still very limited. Many critical questions about the source of the virus, its potential for transmission, important exposures, and the clinical appearance of disease remain unanswered. The evidence that has been accumulated so far remains inconclusive about the origin and transmissibility of this virus. We cannot defeat and conquer the virus as we did against SARS, and in recent times, against the pandemic influenza if so many “unknowns” remain unanswered.

This meeting brings together national experts who have been involved in investigations around the cases that have occurred, scientists who have been involved with the study of the origin of the virus, and experts who participated in the global public health response to SARS and avian influenza. I am confident that this technical consultative meeting will offer opportunities for better understanding the evolution, transmission risk and clinical manifestations associated with this novel coronavirus. We have science and knowledge in our favour. We must use these strengths wisely and decisively.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Currently, we are at a critical public health juncture. While the looming threat of a pandemic from avian influenza still persists, a novel coronavirus has emerged and is threatening to challenge our collective preparedness and global response capacities. This is the lesson of our present time. Emerging and re-emerging diseases will become more frequent and intense in a world of globalization, and also as a result of a phenomenal increase in international travel and trade. Threats from new microbes will emerge as a result of constant mutation and adaptation, which are the survival mechanisms of the microbial world.

In view of these constantly evolving threats, we need a coordinated global public health effort to safeguard and protect our public health. We need an inclusive approach that taps and harnesses expertise from all around the globe. Only then, will we be better prepared for such events. I also take this opportunity to remind ourselves once again of the value and importance of the International Health Regulations (IHR 2005) for rapid and meaningful information-sharing between WHO and State Parties. We have the means today for an international global response if an event becomes internationally overwhelming. As timely intervention is the key to containing the threats of any novel infections, we need to be vigilant at all levels and never lower our guard against any evolving threat.

Dear Colleagues,

I am sure that after this meeting, we will be more prepared for this event than before and we will be better equipped to bring an end to this threat.

I wish you all a very successful meeting and a pleasant stay in Cairo.