



Address by  
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to the  
**INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC MEETING ON MIDDLE EAST RESPIRATORY  
SYNDROME CORONAVIRUS (MERS-CoV)**

**Cairo, Egypt, 5–6 May 2015**

Dear Colleagues, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to welcome you all to this international scientific meeting on Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus, known as MERS-CoV. I wish to express my appreciation 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 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 2012. We also need to see what we should be doing collectively to protect public health from this threat.

Dear Colleagues,

Since the detection of this virus over two and half years ago, our understanding of the epidemiology of the virus has greatly improved but several important knowledge gaps still remain and, worryingly, many basic questions remain unanswered. Although MERS-CoV has continued to evoke worldwide public health concern since its emergence, it has recently been overshadowed by the outbreak of Ebola virus disease. However, being a new virus and of zoonotic origin and having ability to cause severe respiratory disease in humans, the virus continues to be a serious threat to global health security.

You all know that the appearance of a novel coronavirus causing severe respiratory disease in September 2012 triggered a serious global health alert. The discovery of this new virus affecting humans brought back memories of the SARS epidemic in 2003, and indeed it belongs to the same family of coronaviruses that caused that SARS epidemic. WHO has organized three international scientific meetings on MERS-CoV so far. The first of these was held in January 2013, the second in December 2013 and the third meeting was held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in March 2014 where the final protocol for the case–control study on MERS-CoV was finalized. These meetings have

contributed immensely to improving our understanding on the virus, its evolution and risk factors for transmission, as well as identifying critical information and knowledge gaps that can better guide an effective global public health response.

Since our last scientific meeting we have seen that several scientific initiatives and research studies have been undertaken, in both the animal and human health sector of the affected countries. A wealth of evidence has been accumulated through these studies on many aspects of the virus, including its origin, epidemiology and transmission risk factors. A number of important lessons have also been learned from countries on how public health surveillance and response to outbreaks of MERS-CoV can be better organized, given the specific characteristics of the virus and the way the outbreak caused by it has evolved over time. These new developments are important lessons for our public health understanding of the virus. There is also a need to critically review the scientific findings together in a forum like this so that we, and our international partners, can make use of them to improve global health. A scientific meeting such as this, where almost all the global health experts working on the virus are assembled, can also take stock of what new scientific evidence has emerged since our last meeting in 2013, and the questions that still remain unanswered and that are important from the perspective of the global public health response.

One of the important lessons of MERS-CoV is that both the animal health and human health sector need to work together for surveillance and response, joint field investigation and rapid information exchange. This will contribute to a better and more coordinated response and control efforts to reduce the risk of transmission. I am happy therefore to note the presence of representatives from both the Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Organization for Animal Health and ministries of agriculture in this particular meeting.

Since the emergence of this virus, WHO has continued to work with the Member States affected in order to better understand the epidemiological, clinical and virological information related to its disease manifestation. The scientific community has also extended their efforts to know the unknowns. This collective work is helping WHO to manage the public health risks associated with the virus globally.

However, despite all of these global efforts, I must admit that our knowledge of many aspects of this virus is still 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 it, as we did SARS, and more recently pandemic influenza, if so many “unknowns” remain.

As with any other emerging disease, the threat of MERS-CoV as a global health emergency, and its potential for international spread, have not yet faded. Considering the current uncertainties

surrounding this virus, we need to collectively review and agree on how best to address the critical information and knowledge gaps together and step up the global public health actions to prevent and contain the global threats of MERS-CoV, drawing on the lessons and good practices that have been accumulated so far.

In the current era, where the threats from any emerging and novel virus remain unpredictable, we need a coordinated global public health effort to safeguard and protect our health security. 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 take this opportunity also 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 States 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 threat of any novel infection, we need to be vigilant at all levels and never to lower our guard against any evolving threat.

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

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