



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Address by

DR ALA ALWAN

REGIONAL DIRECTOR

WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

to the

FIRST ISLAMIC ADVISORY GROUP (IAG) MEETING

Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, 26–27 February 2014

Your Excellencies from across the Islamic World,

It gives me great pleasure to participate in the first meeting of the Islamic Advisory Group. I am thankful to the International Islamic Fiqh Academy (IIFA) for hosting this meeting in collaboration with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Islamic Development Bank. I would like to thank His Excellency Sheikh Dr Salah Bin Abdullah Bin Humaid, President of the Council of the IIFA, member of the Council of Senior Scholars, Royal Diwan Adviser and Imam Alharam Almakki, for his presence and kind acceptance to chair this important meeting. I am also thankful to His Excellency Dr Iyad Madany, Secretary-General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and His Excellency Dr Ahmed Mohamed Ali Al Madani, President of the Islamic Development Bank, for their presence and support. My thanks and great appreciation go to His Excellency Dr Ahmed El-Tayeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Al Sharif, for his support for this initiative since its establishment. While he has not been able to be with us today, he has delegated Prof. Dr Abbas Abdallah Soliman to represent him. I extend my thanks also to all the Islamic Advisory Group (IAG) members for their presence today at this important meeting.

Excellencies,

We are here today because we stand at a historic crossroads. For the second time only in the history of public health, humankind is very close to eradicating from the face of the earth a disabling and killer disease – poliomyelitis. This is a global goal set by all the nations of the

world through the World Health Assembly in 1988. Of course, it is an absolute in Islam to preserve the well-being and physical health of all children, and it is therefore an obligation for the Muslim community to enable parents and children to access immunization services.

In the first week of March 2013, a group of eminent scholars, representatives of medical organizations and technical experts on polio from the Islamic world met in Cairo; some of you were present at that consultation. The consultation participants were alarmed to see that the remaining three polio-endemic countries – Afghanistan, Nigeria and Pakistan – all belong to the Muslim block; and that therefore children in these countries are being disadvantaged and placed at risk, when other children in the world have been protected. Since then, the situation has worsened further, with outbreaks in Somalia and Syria, and with high-risk of importation to neighbouring countries.

That consultation unanimously resolved that an Islamic Advisory Group be constituted under the leadership of Al Azhar and the IIFA with a mandate to provide guidance and advice on the issues and challenges faced by polio eradication, based on the scientific evidence. The mandate can also be expanded to include other areas of health in the future. Although many activities involving some members have been implemented since then, today is the first formal meeting of this group.

Excellencies,

In recent years, the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean has been privileged to work with Islamic scholars in developing consensus and guidance when advances in medical technology or public health initiatives have posed situations where clear positions consistent with Islamic *sharia*' were required. Consensus is essential to ensure community acceptance of health interventions in all regions, including our own.

In the 1990s, polio was paralyzing an estimated 1000 children daily throughout the world. But with the development of a very safe vaccine, and worldwide efforts to ensure that the vaccine reaches every child, we have succeeded in bringing polio to the brink of eradication – a 99.9% decline has already been achieved. Through this effort, more than 10 million people are walking today who would otherwise have been paralyzed.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have travelled to both Afghanistan and Pakistan multiple times, and have interacted with a range of leaders, scholars and families across our region. A complex social and political environment is now standing in the way of polio eradication. The programme is facing a web of challenges – increasing insecurity, militancy and insurgency – which create an environment in which religious sentiments can be exploited, weakening community trust and creating a climate of fear. The continuous killings of local health workers in certain areas of Pakistan and Nigeria have added an unprecedented dimension to the violent militancy in those areas, and are a threat, not only to the programme but to the cause of polio eradication in the Region and the world as a whole. These health workers are being killed because they are trying to help protect children in their own communities. Meanwhile this results in fewer children being vaccinated and more cases of paralysis and death. The lives of children and the polio programme are being held hostage to other interests.

As a result, during the January 2014 meeting of the WHO Executive Board, several Member States, particularly from the Region, extended their heartfelt condolences to the people of Pakistan and condemned in the strongest terms the attacks on and killings of health workers in the country. They expressed concern about the polio situation in Pakistan and requested the Director-General to urgently convene an emergency committee under the International Health Regulations (2005) to review and advise her on the requirements for travellers' vaccination to and from the polio-endemic and re-infected countries.

Excellencies,

We are gathered here to explore ways in which your guidance can help the Muslim community reach a consensus on how to end polio in the remaining countries, and thereby the world. Except for just a few areas of the three countries concerned, all other communities and countries of the world, Muslim and non-Muslim, have eradicated polio. This has been achieved through the application of the same eradication strategies, administration of the same vaccines, and financial and political support from all quarters. Eminent Islamic scholars from all schools of thought have issued edicts (*fatwas*) in support of polio immunization in the light of Islamic teachings. Political and health leaders in all Muslim countries have successfully promoted vaccination and polio eradication. However, in the current environment of fear and confusion, the Islamic community needs visible solidarity. Islamic scholars and political and

traditional tribal and community leaders need to speak with one voice to address misconceptions, and counter false propaganda and disinformation.

We need your wisdom to guide us all through these challenging times. We look forward to your advice on the way forward, on how we might work together and what WHO and other partners might do to help address this issue and build consensus among the Muslim leadership and community on polio eradication. We will be failing in our duty if we do not ensure that all children are protected against this crippling disease. We need to send a strong message of hope to the families at risk and also a strong message to those who are impeding the basic right of children to health and life.

This is your meeting. WHO is here to provide technical guidance and support. I am confident you will be successful in finding ways to help protect our children from this disabling disease. We look forward to ever stronger collaboration with Al Azhar and IIFA, and to increased partnership with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and Islamic Development Bank in addressing this challenge, and will be pleased to work with you in implementing your decisions.