Updated EMR COVID-19 strategic preparedness and response plan

WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean has developed an updated regional plan of action to support countries in rapidly scaling up capacities for prevention, early detection and response to COVID-19. This update to the original regional plan reflects the ever-changing COVID-19 situation in the Region. The plan is aligned with the global WHO plan as well as the global strategy update with appropriate adaptations to the regional context.

Editorial note

The first WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region COVID-19 strategic preparedness and response plan was developed in February, when the first few cases were reported in the Region. This strategy was focused on the early outbreak phase, and included analysis on risk of importation of cases as well as areas of work and priority actions, and aligned with the emergency response framework. In March 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak was characterized as a pandemic by the Director General of WHO and spread to more countries in the Region. The magnitude of the outbreak therefore required a concomitant adaptation of strategy.

The existing complex humanitarian emergencies in many countries of the Region were compounded by COVID-19 outbreaks. More than 40% of people in need of humanitarian assistance globally are located in this Region. As of 28 June 2020, WHO confirmed more than 1 million cases of COVID-19 in the EMR. The cases progressed to a peak at the end of June 2020, and now appear to be stabilizing at approximately 10% of the global burden of cases. While the overall regional trend of cases is leveling off or declining, there is a mixed picture at country level. Some countries are observing an increasing number of cases, while others are exhibiting a decline. Nonetheless, many countries have already started to ease public health and social restriction measures that were undertaken in order to curb the spread of the virus. Considering the rapidly evolving COVID-19 situation in the Region has necessitated the review and updating of the response strategy.

Thus, the updated strategic plan outlines the main public health measures that will support and prioritize in order to facilitate an effective response in countries. Summaries of national strategies for containment and mitigation of COVID-19 are included, such as case finding, testing and isolation; reporting; clinical management; public health and social measures; and research and knowledge sharing. Regional strategic objectives have been redefined, and areas of work have been expanded. These areas of work are leadership, partnership and coordination; epidemiology, outbreak investigation and health information; laboratory diagnostics; infection prevention and control; case management and isolation; operations support and logistics; risk communication and community engagement; points of entry; mental health and psychosocial support; working in fragile and vulnerable settings; health systems strengthening; research and knowledge management; programme planning and administration/finance; resource mobilization and grant management; and communications.

The proposed activities reflect the evolution of the outbreak and the budget is outlined for the support that will be provided until December 2020. The planned budget to support the proposed priority activities at regional level is US $15 million. A regional monitoring and evaluation framework has also been updated and will be further revised during the next planned quarterly review.

The updated plan is expected to launch within two weeks after the Regional Director’s approval and it will disseminated to all WHO country offices and partners.