

**Address by**

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**to the**

**SIXTY-NINTH SESSION OF THE WHO REGIONAL COMMITTEE FOR THE  
EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN**

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Your Excellencies Members of the Regional Committee,  
My dear brother Dr Tedros Adhanom, WHO Director-General,  
Excellencies heads of diplomatic missions,  
Honourable representatives of United Nations agencies and community organizations,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

May peace, mercy and the blessings of God be upon you.

As I address you today my heart is both joyful and heavy. I am joyful because after two years of virtual Regional Committees it gives me great pleasure to welcome many participants to the WHO Regional Office in person. Although we are now all well used to virtual meetings, nothing can fully replace face-to-face engagement.

But my heart is also heavy because of the terrible challenges affecting so many people in our Region – from multiple conflicts to the earthquake in Afghanistan, both chronic and acute food insecurity in the Horn of Africa, floods in Pakistan and the recent cholera outbreak in Syrian Arab Republic. These intersecting crises take a severe toll on people's health, livelihoods and lives and make it even more difficult to achieve Health for All by All. Yet I know that if we focus firmly on what is possible, together we can make that vision a reality.

The theme of the 69th session of the Regional Committee is “Together for a healthier and sustainable tomorrow”. Now is the time to rebuild better and fairer, drawing on all that we have learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. We need both to focus on sustainable investments in health as part of the road towards the Sustainable Development Goals and to ensure that we are better prepared for future threats to health. Rebuilding from COVID-19 means building resilient health systems that better equip us to prevent and respond to future pandemics, address the growing health implications of conflict, climate change and environmental degradation, and can maintain essential health services, preserving the health of individuals and communities even in the toughest circumstances.

Throughout, we must focus on supporting the most vulnerable in our societies, who are generally also those worst affected by crises and the most lacking in social protection and access to quality basic services. Enhancing health equity and addressing inequalities to the best of our ability should no longer be optional, but rather a key measure of our success. We often highlight the high number of fragile, conflict-affected and vulnerable settings in our Region. This is indeed a challenge, but it is also an opportunity to demonstrate the power of health as a bridge to peace, working with communities to find common ground in our shared humanity. For example, we are currently collaborating on the Youth for Peace project in Somalia, an innovative mental health initiative that provides young people with psychological support to help build a peaceful society.

We are constantly mindful of the sacrifices our colleagues in the frontlines make every day. We have continued to lose dedicated health workers to COVID-19 and, unacceptably, health facilities have continued to be targeted amid armed conflict. At the World Health Assembly in May, we honoured eight polio campaigners who lost their lives while undertaking their duties in Afghanistan. Their memory remains with us as we celebrate important milestones like the end of the vaccine-derived polio outbreak in Sudan last month. We expect a lot from people, including in very difficult settings, and we also want to give back. For this reason, and in an effort to go beyond the minimum duty of care, my team is working to set up the **Imtinan (امتنان)** Fund – an endowment to support the non-statutory priority needs of the families of health workers we have lost in the line of duty.

WHO has been under the spotlight during the pandemic and I would like to say how proud I am of the way the WHO workforce throughout the Region have stepped up to meet the challenge, concentrating on the critical task of supporting our Member States even when their own lives were directly impacted.

Moving forward, we need to remember that the pandemic is not over yet, and we must remain vigilant in the face of the threat of new variants, and attentive to “long COVID” and worrying increases in non-COVID excess mortality. But this also gives us a unique opportunity to strengthen decentralized innovation, localized surveillance systems, information and knowledge economies.

Investing in resilience, prevention and preparedness is always difficult to prioritize because success is invisible: an effective system keeps us safe by stopping emergencies before they begin. But COVID-19 has shown the potential cost of not strengthening our systems. So we need to recognize the value of timely investment rather than paying all too dearly later.

During this Regional Committee session, we will consider important topics such as One Health, digital health, universal health coverage and health security, holistic and integrated responses to communicable diseases, and promoting health and well-being; and today’s pre-RC technical meetings focused on the attainable goals of eliminating cervical cancer, improving emergency response monitoring, reducing deaths and injuries due to road accidents, strengthening hospital information systems and enhancing local vaccine production.

A common theme in the coming days will be the need for integration and multisectoral action. Health is everyone's business, and we need coordinated whole-of-government and whole-of-society efforts at both the national and regional levels. As we address the commercial, social and economic determinants and underlying barriers to the achievement of Health for All by All, we will also start to enjoy positive externalities, with every action delivering dividends beyond its prime focus.

As the UN General Assembly recently declared, everyone has the right to a sustainable and healthy environment. COP27, hosted by Egypt next month, provides an essential focus for collective action on climate change. We must build health systems that are responsive to ever-increasing climate risks. One recent scientific review concluded that 58% of infectious diseases that affect humans are aggravated by climate change. With increasing pressures on domestic fiscal space, aligning available flows and finding innovative solutions and additional sources of revenue for health remain imperative. Health financing is one of the systemic building blocks that is critical for our ability to make progress.

At the same time, we truly appreciate the overwhelming support for sustainable financing of WHO, especially the plan to increase assessed contributions to reach 50% of base budget. The pursuit of the health-related SDGs is not a sprint but a marathon, and the world needs a strong WHO with the resources to carry out its mandate. Sustainable financing will allow us to focus on supporting you, our Member States, along with our sister UN entities and members of the Regional Health Alliance. A successful marathon runner needs different equipment and training than a sprinter, so please continue helping us to prepare for this long race. Together, we can win!

This year's Human Development Report from our colleagues in the UN Development Programme is titled *Uncertain times, unsettled lives: shaping our future in a transforming world*. It is clear we are facing a challenging period. But I think transformation offers our best hope: the world is transforming and so must we. Life expectancy in many parts of the Region is stagnating or falling. We need to change the way we work to meet that challenge. Resilient health systems and universal health coverage demand a whole-of-government approach. Increasing health security through pandemic prevention, preparedness and response is a whole-of-society endeavour. WHO must be at the centre of this transformation. We must support you to forge and maintain meaningful partnerships that are truly intersectoral. If we do not, we will be forced to relearn the lessons from COVID over and over again, and frankly we do not have the luxury of time for that.

Governance matters and health governance directly contributes to saved lives and better health outcomes and well-being for people in our Region, in line with SDG3 and beyond. We need to join hands in health diplomacy for our common good, and continue to make the political choice to invest in health today and tomorrow. I will be delivering this same message next week at the World Health Summit, and I hope it is at the forefront of all our minds in the coming days as we take critical decisions setting the priority health agenda for the Region. It is a privilege for me to work with you, and I look forward to a fruitful Regional Committee session.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Your Excellencies for your continued support for the work of WHO throughout the Region. My thanks also go to all partners for their generous support over the past year, which has enabled us to implement our programmes on the ground despite many challenges. I extend my heartfelt thanks to my WHO colleagues, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, for their dedication, hard work and commitment to achieve the Organization's goals: promoting health, keeping the world safe and serving the vulnerable. Please, never lose that positive spirit.

Finally, I thank all Members of the Regional Committee for your continuous efforts to reach this point. Rest assured, all three levels of WHO will do our utmost to support you in fulfilling our common goal: to serve people in the Eastern Mediterranean Region and beyond.

I wish us all a productive and successful session.