

**Address by**

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**to the**

**HIGH-LEVEL MEETING ON INTERIM PRIORITIES FOR THE HEALTH SECTOR  
IN AFGHANISTAN**

**Doha, Qatar, 29–31 March 2022**

Your Excellency Dr. Saleh AL-Marri, Assistant Minister of Public Health For Health Affairs-  
Qatar,

Excellencies,

Distinguished colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to be here in Doha. Let me start by expressing my deep appreciation to Qatar for hosting this important meeting. Thank you for the generous arrangements and hospitality extended to us all.

Qatar has always been a key partner and supporter of the World Health Organization, and has played a vital role in recent months in ensuring successful and timely deliveries of urgently needed medicines and health supplies to Afghanistan, including during the most acute stage of last year's escalating emergency. Qatar also provided an aircraft and diplomatic support for the high-level WHO mission to Afghanistan led by our Director-General last September.

Over the next three days, we will discuss how to adapt service delivery modalities, strengthen health systems, address humanitarian needs, and improve health governance and coordination for the Afghan people. These are critical issues, as Afghanistan is facing a massive developmental and humanitarian crisis with major public health implications.

The country's health system functions only partially, while humanitarian needs have soared – putting at risk the very substantial health gains of the past 20 years.

Nearly 25 million people now require humanitarian assistance, with an estimated 18.1 million needing humanitarian health services. Over 23 million people face acute food insecurity, 4.7 million suffer from malnutrition and 1.1 million children are at risk of severe acute malnutrition.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has not been as explosive in Afghanistan as in numerous other countries, previous waves claimed nearly 7500 Afghan lives and only 10% of the population are fully vaccinated – well below the global target of 40% for the end of 2021.

The health workforce has suffered serious losses in recent months due to emigration and brain drain, including the departure of many female health workers and specialists, while thousands of other health workers had not received their salaries for up to seven months until recently.

Developing, supporting and protecting health workers must be one of our main priorities, including female health workers. We know that the health of any country – including Afghanistan – is directly related to girls' education. When girls are educated they are better able to care for the health of their families and communities. And many will grow up to be doctors, nurses, midwives and so on. WHO believes strongly that the health and development of Afghanistan depends on all of its children and youth having access to quality education.

Nonetheless, I am proud of the way in which Afghan health workers, with the support of WHO, UNICEF and other partners, have stepped forward to serve their people under the most challenging circumstances. A recent review of over 900 health facilities by WHO found that 99% of these facilities are fully functional, and fewer than 1% have stockouts. Health facilities continue to provide basic and essential health services at both primary and secondary care levels, including the provision of maternal and child health services, treatment of acute malnutrition, management of infectious and noncommunicable diseases, and trauma care and mental health care.

Measles continues to claim the lives of children in Afghanistan, aggravated by extremely high levels of malnutrition that weaken immunity. In response, a measles immunization campaign was conducted from 12 to 18 March, targeting 1.2 million children in 49 districts across 24 provinces. Initial reports from the field indicate 98% coverage, and we are now working on Phase 2 of the campaign targeting over 2 million children. For the rest of the year, we plan to have a nationwide measles campaign to bridge the immunity gap among susceptible children and strengthen routine immunization coverage. WHO, UNICEF and other partners have also collaborated effectively to tackle other recent outbreaks of dengue fever and acute watery diarrhea.

Such collective efforts can help to maintain the impressive health gains of the past 20 years, and even improve on them. Much of that progress can be attributed to the Sehatmandi project, the backbone of the national health system.

Among our greatest health sector assets in Afghanistan are the courageous front-line polio workers. The polio programme in Afghanistan is about more than just polio. Our dedicated polio workers have been active since the 1990s, and enjoy the trust, respect and support of all communities. They reach children not just with polio vaccines, but also with vaccines to prevent measles, rubella and COVID-19, despite the humanitarian situation on the ground. Over recent months they have also closely monitored the functioning and urgent needs of health facilities to serve local communities.

Last year, WHO and UNICEF with support from partners implemented nationwide campaigns after a three-year hiatus, reaching 8.5 million children, including 2.6 million who were previously inaccessible. However, we are still missing the most vulnerable children – many of whom have never received a single dose of polio vaccine. The transmission of wild poliovirus is at historic low levels in Afghanistan, but we need continued support from all actors to ensure that we seize this opportunity to eradicate polio.

Even as we confront multiple other humanitarian crises across the globe, we must collectively commit to full engagement in the health sector in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future. Operational agencies and donors must each play their roles. The costs of underinvestment would be intolerable – in terms of lives lost, health system disruption, and threats to the growth and development of an entire generation of Afghan children and youth.

In closing, let me stress the importance of solidarity and partnership among all stakeholders in tackling the complex and critical health challenges that have brought us here today. We must all work together to ensure Health for All by All in Afghanistan – so that no one is left behind in our vision of a better quality of life for the Afghan people, and for humanity as a whole.