

**Address by**

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**to the**

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

**Cairo, Egypt, 12–13 October 2020**

Your Excellencies members of the Regional Committee,  
My dear brother Dr Tedros Adhanom, Director-General of the World Health Organization,  
Ladies and gentlemen, heads of diplomatic missions and representatives of the United Nations  
agencies and community organizations,  
Brothers and sisters, distinguished participants,

السلام عليكم ورحمة الله

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

In the beginning, let me extend, on your behalf, to all peoples in our Region and the world at large my deepest condolences and sympathy for the victims of the COVID-19 pandemic. Let me also express my sorrow for the socioeconomic and health impacts of COVID-19, overwhelming our systems and countries at a time when we were in great need of stability, security, serenity and peace. Moreover, I extend my sincere condolences and sympathy to His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al Ahmad Al Sabah, Emir of Kuwait, and the Kuwaiti people and Government for the death of His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmad Al Sabah. The late Sheikh Sabah will be long remembered for his service to Kuwait, the Arab and Islamic Nations and humanity as a whole.

Now, I would like to extend my sincere greetings together with my heartfelt acknowledgement and appreciation to you and to all the health care workers who have been and remain on the front lines in the fight against the pandemic, and who willingly and immediately devoted themselves to provide, to the best of their abilities, medical, health and psychological services to the victims and their families. Many health care workers have died of COVID-19. We recognize them as truthful and martyrs. They are granted the company of the Prophets and the righteous; how excellent these companions are!

Dear brothers and sisters, honourable participants,

I thank you all for your kind presence and participation today, either in person in this hall or virtually on line, attending this annual meeting, in which we review our work over the past year since our last meeting, discuss the challenges and difficulties we encountered and identify our achievements and failures.

The past period was particularly important. The whole world, including the Eastern Mediterranean Region, was busy fighting COVID-19, which appeared only a few weeks after our last meeting, and remains to this day. We do not yet know exactly when we will, God willing, be able to declare our ultimate victory over COVID-19 and eliminate its impacts on different facets of our life.

We were therefore keen to dedicate this session of the Regional Committee as far as possible to COVID-19, ensuring that we embrace one vision for this Region, harmonize our work methods and strategies, coordinate our response efforts, intensify our confrontation, optimize the use of available expertise, streamline the sharing of experiences, information and lessons learned and tackle the damage affecting our health systems and users. In so doing, we will be guided by WHO's vision for the Region, *Vision 2023 – Health for All by All*, which calls for solidarity and action and builds on our deeply held values of cooperation, fraternity, solidarity, synergy and solidarity.

Your Excellencies, sisters and brothers,

As you know, the first cases of COVID-19 were reported in our Region on 29 January 2020. The very next day, WHO declared COVID-19 as a public health emergency of international concern, affecting the Member States to different degrees, and invariably affecting all peoples. The total number of cases reported in the Region as at 10 October 2020 has reached nearly 2 607 179 cases, at a morbidity rate of about 355 case per 100 000 of the Region's population (731 million people). Deaths due to COVID-19 reached 66 515 deaths at a rate of 2.5 deaths per 100 000 population.

In response to this pandemic, the Member States, WHO and partners have, since the detection of the first cases, geared up for action. WHO developed a regional response plan, and a regional Incident Management Support Team (IMST) was established to guide and coordinate the response. Country support teams were also established at the regional level to provide guidance to all 22 countries in the Region. In addition, a ministerial group of seven countries supported by a technical task force was established to provide further deep analysis of different response methods in the Region and generate ideas for improving different areas of response to better match country needs. Over the past months, remarkable achievements have been made in our fight against the pandemic at both regional and country levels. For example, 57 emergency surge deployment missions were conducted across the Region in support of the countries; 324 shipments of COVID-19 supplies weighing 1600 tons were delivered to 108 countries from our logistics hub in Dubai, including personal protective equipment to protect 3 million health

workers. With WHO's support, over 400 laboratories in all 22 countries of the Region now have the capacity to test for COVID-19. In addition, more than 100 technical guidance documents were shared with countries and 80 virtual training sessions were conducted to enhance the capacities of thousands of health professionals in a wide range of areas, including rapid response, infection prevention and control, clinical management, risk communications and community engagement, and others. Risk communication messages on COVID-19 on our regional social media platforms were viewed 1.2 billion times from February to September 2020, compared to 980 000 views during the same time last year. To inform the ministers of health of the newly updated COVID-19 guidance, policies and recommendations by WHO, more than 220 messages were shared directly by the Regional Director. Overall, our response to COVID-19 in the Region was supported by generous contributions from donors and countries in the Region and beyond totaling almost US\$ 400 million. In this regard, I would like to thank all contributors for their generosity.

In spite of all the preventive measures, health and medical interventions, and the unparalleled official and popular interaction and cooperation in all Member States without exception, regrettably the pandemic has revealed serious rifts and deep weaknesses in institutions, economies, health systems and even in societies and relations all over the world.

The status of our Region is no better, given the complex conditions being experienced by many Member States in the Region, the political, economic and security instability, widespread armed conflicts, civil wars, various natural disasters, high rates of poverty and population displacement internally and externally, large numbers of refugees, and so on. All these factors were, and still are, concerns. There is a fear that conditions may worsen and lead, God forbid, to developments that are difficult to control or manage simultaneously, especially if we reflect on the actual and potential implications of the pandemic at the local, regional and global levels.

Many of you, I assume, know that the global economy will lose approximately US\$ 8.5 trillion in output over the next two years as a result of this pandemic. In other words, almost all the gains achieved over the previous four years are being reversed. The pandemic is also expected to push more than 34 million people into extreme poverty by the end of this year. Just think of the potential negative repercussions. And these are only two examples.

At the regional level, the economy is expected to shrink by 4.7%, and up to 13% in countries experiencing emergencies. This accounts for a total loss that is estimated to exceed US\$ 152 billion. This will add new burdens to the current suffering and may push Member States to take emergency measures that would negatively affect all aspects of the population's life in this Region.

Sisters and brothers,

The papers to be presented during this session will highlight the impacts of the pandemic in the past or future, especially on health services, the need to ensure the continuity of services during

the pandemic, the provision of essential medicines, vaccines and medical products, and research on recent developments in COVID-19 preparedness and response in the Region.

At this important session, we hope that your discussions, deliberations, review of the lessons learned in your respective States, along with your questions, proposals and recommendations, will hopefully constitute a general framework for the next phase of our work, which, as I have indicated, may be no less difficult than what we have gone through so far.

I expect that many of the attendees still remember my speech at our previous Regional Committee meeting last October in Tehran. As I noted then, this Region, despite difficulties and challenges, is extremely diverse and rich in its history, civilization and heritage as well as its geographical location, climate, natural resources and human potential. All these factors, harnessed through sincere efforts, can contribute to reducing the negative effects of the pandemic and alleviating people's suffering.

We should therefore turn this disaster into a real opportunity to reformulate our health policies and strategies, ensuring the creative implementation of our vision in the Region, *Vision 2023*, anchored on solidarity and cooperation towards Health for All by All.

Sisters and brothers,

The response to COVID-19 has overwhelmed all our activities during the past period, and this situation may persist in the future. However, other health issues and goals should not be neglected due to this situation. Health is an integrated and intertwined process and is an integral whole, with all some of its components interact and mutually affect each other.

Now, allow me, dear brothers and sisters, to refer to the gaps in achieving the triple billion goals of the WHO Thirteenth General Program of Work (GPW13), and to highlight the need to work diligently to help our Region contribute to these global goals, notably the first goal, to achieve the universal health coverage (UHC), and the third goal, to enjoy better health and well-being. There is still a wide gap between the plans and the actual achievements concerning these two goals, compared to the second goal to protect people from health emergencies, which is so far on the right track as planned.

As for health programmes, particularly programmes of primary health care, vaccination, family health, improving health care quality and others, I would like to point out the importance of maintaining the achievements made in all countries of the Region. I hope that our attention and focus on the pandemic will not be at the expense of these programmes, avoiding any unpleasant setbacks. I am sure that you have realized that our response to the disaster was commensurate with the success we have achieved in other health programmes. We should not give up on the success achieved for causes that can be avoided in due time.

So I invite you all to consider this catastrophe as an opportunity to address any inefficiencies in our health journey, analyze weaknesses and strengths in our health systems and initiate a process of extensive dialogue and action. This should involve the participation of the largest

number possible of scientists, intellectuals, innovators and all segments of society to express their opinions, and provide advice, consultation and effective participation in the objective analysis of the operation of every country's health sector, separately and at the regional and global levels. The aim should be to identify the lessons learned; stimulating thinking, leveraging potentials and capabilities; exploring the future and addressing the structural weaknesses in communities and institutions in various health-related sectors, meeting the present and future needs of countries and peoples of the Region, and fulfilling the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 as well as other national and regional plans.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate my gratitude to you, the Regional Committee members, health care workers wherever they serve, WHO staff across the various levels of the Organization, our partners and allies, and those who have been supporting us in advancing health action to achieve national, regional and global goals. I assure you that we, at World Health Organization, will always advocate and stand up for people, wherever they are, and will continue to provide our Member States with technical, advisory and other forms of support, to the utmost of our ability.

I wish you a successful and fruitful session.

Praying God the Almighty to guide our steps on the right track.

Thank you!