

Opening Address by

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WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

to the

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Your Excellencies, Members of the Regional Committee,

Dear brother Dr Tedros Adhanom, WHO Director-General,

Ladies and Gentlemen, heads of diplomatic missions,

Honourable representatives of United Nations agencies and community organizations,

Honourable participants,

Peace, mercy and the blessings of God be upon you,

Thankfully, we meet today with all of you at our annual regional meeting, following a year full of significant health momentum, the achievements of which will be added to the great success stories we have been able to achieve in past years. Although we have faced great challenges and difficulties, we have not allowed them to stop us from moving forward. Instead, we have turned most of them into opportunities that opened up new prospects for action in the Region, and encouraged us to unhesitatingly take a number of corrective actions, with concerted collective efforts, in line with our regional vision, Vision 2023, which calls for solidarity and action to achieve Health for All by All.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

At last year's Regional Committee (RC) meeting, I referred to a number of key facts about our Region. All those facts are important, but I would like to recall three of them that I have selected for their relevance to the health level of our people in the Region, and because they remain, among others, a significant challenge for us in the next few years:

The first fact is that COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized the urgent need for strong and resilient health systems, underpinned and supported by stronger economic, social and security systems. You yourselves have seen the significant variation among countries in responding to and dealing with the pandemic. The appropriateness of that response correlated with the degree of development, cooperation and harmony of systems. We have all witnessed the

disruption and collapse of many systems, societies, institutions and economies due to weak health systems.

We all know that the pandemic is not over yet, and we are still witnessing a fluctuation in the ensuing morbidity and mortality. However, we still see complacency among individuals when it comes to observing preventive measures. For many reasons, we have not yet achieved the planned vaccination coverage. The persistence of this pandemic will therefore continue to have significant negative effects on our health systems and our performance in other services, and thus on our journey towards the Sustainable Development Goals, the triple billion targets of WHO's Thirteenth General Programme of Work (GPW 13), and the goals of the *Vision 2023*, which is entering the second half of its planned period.

In our Region, good results have been achieved regarding the second billion target of GPW 13 on protecting people from health emergencies, but our task with regard to the other two targets remains difficult, as the worldwide gap in reaching the first target – ensuring that 1 billion more people benefit from universal health coverage – is still more than 70%, and our Region's contribution to this global gap is 15%. The Region's countries are moving slowly towards achieving the third target on more people enjoying better health and well-being, as the maternal mortality rate remains high (about 164 deaths per 100 000 live births in 2017), and infant and under-five mortality rates in 2019 were 25 and 46 per 1000 live births, respectively. Noncommunicable diseases continue to account for approximately 62% of all deaths in the Region. Unfortunately, our Region has one of the highest rates of road accidents, most victims of which are young people who constitute the economically productive segment of society.

The second fact is that our Region has the largest number of countries suffering from various crises and disasters, which resulted in more than 32 million people being forcibly displaced or migrating across borders, representing 40% of all forcibly displaced people worldwide. We have observed that the problem lies not only in the large number of displaced people, but also in their profile, as a large proportion of them are educated professionals and intellectuals, and their migration has caused a significant imbalance in their numbers and increased the need for them in their countries of origin. Furthermore, the mass influx of displaced people to neighbouring countries has caused multiple pressures on systems in those receiving countries, thus affecting both sending and receiving countries.

The Region now hosts 43% of the entire global population in need of humanitarian assistance. This has led us to work together to help sending countries strengthen their health systems and remain resilient, and to help receiving countries identify the health needs of incoming populations and work with relevant organizations to provide necessary support. Providing essential health services to people affected by emergencies, either inside and outside their countries, is a priority for all of us. They have urgent and complex needs that require solidarity, partnership, synergy and collaboration to work hand in hand, in fulfilment of the words of our honourable Prophet, peace and blessing be upon him and all other Prophets: "Allah's Hand is over the group."

The third fact is that polio no longer exists in any part of the world except in our Region, where it continues to infect and disable our children. The danger of its spread persists, threatening public health at the local, regional and global levels. Today, we hope that recent progress will put an end to this disease.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

These challenges, among others, required an in-depth review of our work, especially as our vision for the Region, Vision 2023, is halfway through its term. Therefore, last February, I established a taskforce of external experts and WHO staff, chaired by Dr Maha El Rabbat, to conduct a systematic review of the implementation of Vision 2023 and develop a Vision 2023 Midterm Push Forward Plan. This Task Force has developed a report, to be presented to you at the present session, which includes an overview of the achievements made and shortfalls in the first half of the Vision implementation period, as well as an overview of lessons learned, opportunities and gaps that require urgent intervention. The report concludes with a Vision 2023 Midterm Push Forward Plan along with a general framework for monitoring and evaluation over the coming period.

The taskforce's recommendations set out the most important priorities that should be the focus in the coming period, both for the Region's countries and for the WHO Secretariat, according to a carefully thought-out plan, taking into account the facts mentioned earlier, to ensure maximum success. Through concerted efforts, mobilization of necessary physical and human resources, and use of creative and innovative approaches, we hope to overcome various constraints we face so that we can build strong and effective health systems that provide high-quality health services to all populations of different ages and disparities.

And speaking of health services, let me make special mention of the remarkable heroic role that medical and health workers around the globe have been playing in saving lives in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Let's pray for God to bestow His mercy on those health workers who gave their lives to protect their families and fellow citizens, and pay tribute to those who have been steadfastly fighting the pandemic. Please express your sincere appreciation and respect to all of them, alleviate their suffering, facilitate their work and be sure to support them consistently and develop them.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we review these and other facts and the challenges before us in the Region, I would like to mention the visit I made with my dear brother Dr Tedros to Lebanon and Afghanistan, where we have directly seen the extent of challenges facing the health systems of both countries as well as the extreme difficulties experienced by community members in accessing basic health services, not to mention other health services. We have seen health facilities with almost no basic materials, such as medicines, surgical kits, and so on, operating without electricity supply. We have seen health workers who had not been paid for months. However, most of them are real heroes who, despite these harsh conditions, continue to tirelessly do their job and strive to serve, protect and save the lives of their people. In addition to volunteers working day and night to help health personnel, we have seen supporters, partners and funders

of various programmes implemented by UN agencies and governmental and nongovernmental organizations.

All of these efforts have, thankfully, helped to save many lives and alleviate the suffering of our people in the Region. I would like to take this opportunity to extend to all of them, on behalf of myself and all the staff of the WHO and our sister UN agencies, our sincere thanks and appreciation for their contributions, reiterating our complete willingness to strengthen our partnership with them in order to ensure the continuation of this support, especially to countries suffering from resource shortages and weak health systems.

In this respect, I would like to underline that we are proceeding, with God's help, at a steady pace in strengthening WHO's presence on the ground and in every field wherever we can through our offices and staff in all countries of the Region, inspired by our regional vision of Health for All by all, and in harmony, coordination and partnership with various regional and global health frameworks. We will work on implementing recommendations of the taskforce to accelerate the realization of the vision, address challenges, fill the gaps, build on the successes achieved and take advantage of existing opportunities. We reaffirm our Regional Office's commitment to continuous development, ongoing review of the performance of our country offices and regional programmes, and development of human and technical capacities of health workers, as well as strengthening cooperation and integration with various UN and non-UN agencies and organizations. Within WHO, we will maintain an appropriate working environment for staff, with a strong emphasis on enforcing fair rules in recruitment, induction, training and performance monitoring, as well as preventing abuse of authority and misconduct.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We count on this Session to contribute to the achievement of such synergy, fraternity and solidarity, and to moving forward in implementing our agreed plans and programmes. Accordingly, we made sure to capitalize on the existing momentum in the Region by making the pre-RC technical discussions and RC working papers highly relevant to these topics. We also made sure that the RC is accompanied by a number of events, panel discussions and a marketplace to add to and reinforce that momentum. I hope you will participate in them and share your views and suggestions on all these topics.

Truly, WHO cannot achieve anything without the active support of our Member States and partners. I look forward to your participation during this session and in all the important business that lies ahead. In this regard, I would like to highlight the critical importance of proposals from the Working Group on Sustainable Financing which are under discussion globally. I call on our Member States to give their strong collective support to this work, to ensure that WHO gets the resources we need and the flexibility to respond to fast-moving challenges. We cannot achieve the progress we need on other issues without progress on sustainable financing.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In conclusion, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to you all, to the members of Regional Subcommittee and to all my brothers and sisters in the Regional Office and the country offices who have made strenuous efforts for us to gather here to chart together the path towards implementing different health programmes and our regional strategy. We, at the three levels of WHO, assure you of our determination to provide the maximum possible technical support so that we can achieve our common goals in cooperation with various governmental and nongovernmental organizations and in partnership with UN agencies and community-based organizations. I wish you all success for the good of this Region and its people.

And now, we would like to invite you to watch a video, highlighting our shared opportunities and challenges in our journey towards rebuilding better and fairer: stronger systems and resilient communities.

Thank you for your kind attention.