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## **Progress report on the work of the High-level Ministerial Group on the Control of Tobacco and Emerging Tobacco and Nicotine Products in the Eastern Mediterranean Region**

### **Background**

1. Tobacco control remains a major public health challenge in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region. The many other competing priorities at national level and strong lobbying of the tobacco industry to undermine tobacco control policies and strategies present a great impediment to achieving the goal of a reduction in tobacco use of 30% by 2025. Recognizing this, the WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean proposed to the 68th session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean, the formation of a high-level ministerial group to focus on tobacco control. This proposal was endorsed in resolution EM/RC68/R.1, resulting in the establishment of the High-level Ministerial Group on the Control of Tobacco and Emerging Tobacco and Nicotine Products in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (HLM).

2. As laid out in the Annex to resolution EM/RC68/R.1, the term of the HLM is two years, subject to renewal based on a decision by the Regional Committee. Membership of the HLM is composed of six Member States, with the first six requests prioritized in the selection process. Other requests are granted Observer status in the Group. The HLM is to meet twice a year, with one annual meeting coinciding with the annual session of the Regional Committee and the other being scheduled based on need.

3. The terms of reference of the HLM are to:

- galvanize high-level strategic leadership and action at both regional and national levels;
- foster and initiate high-level policy dialogue to stimulate commitment to, and advocate for, the control of tobacco and emerging products at regional and national level, as specified in the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) and the MPOWER measures;
- advocate for a whole-of-government approach towards better control of tobacco and emerging products at national level;
- identify strategic action to counter tobacco industry interference to undermine policies to control tobacco and novel and emerging products, and advocate for its implementation; and
- communicate key information to Member States in the Region, based on needs and priorities, to accelerate actions in the area of tobacco and nicotine control.

### **Status and progress**

4. Once the Regional Committee endorsed the establishment of the HLM, membership application was opened for Member States. Six countries applied, and accordingly, the Group was established. Currently, the Group is composed of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Jordan, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar and Tunisia.

5. Each meeting of the HLM focuses on one selected technical area in tobacco control.

6. During the first meeting, Qatar was selected as the Chair of the Group for one year, to be followed by Oman for the second year.

7. The HLM has met four times: in June 2022, October 2022, June 2023 and January 2024. The meetings focused on:

- the general status of tobacco control in the Region;
- taxes for tobacco and nicotine products; and
- the *WHO report on the global tobacco epidemic, 2023* and the 2024 *WHO global report on trends in prevalence of tobacco use 2000–2030*.

8. The outcomes of the four meetings of the HLM and its key recommendations were shared with Member States that are not members of the HLM.

9. Key activities based on the recommendations of the HLM include:

- a high-level meeting for ministers of health and ministers of finance held in June 2023, focusing on tobacco taxation and investment in tobacco control;
- the development in consultation with Member States of factsheets on tobacco taxation in each country of the Region;
- the development of a technical document on “quick wins” for tobacco control in the Region; and
- regional training on implementing plain packaging, conducted in December 2022 by WHO in collaboration with the McCabe Center for Law & Cancer in Australia.

## Challenges

10. The work of the HLM is strengthening political commitment to tobacco control in the Region. However, there remain many challenges, not least the efforts of the tobacco industry to undermine tobacco control activities. WHO will continue to work with the HLM to address the different challenges that threaten regional progress in tobacco control towards achieving a 30% relative reduction in tobacco use, in line with the noncommunicable disease voluntary global targets and the Sustainable Development Goals.

## Way forward

11. It is therefore recommended that the term of the HLM be extended for another two years (2025–2026), with a report submitted to the 74th session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean in 2027.

12. It is also suggested that another four countries be invited to join the HLM, after the extension of its term, to have a total of 10 members. Nominations for membership will be accepted during a two-month period, and the new members accepted on a first come, first served basis, with any further countries requesting membership being granted Observer status to the work of the group.