



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Address by

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to the

LAUNCH OF VISION 2020–THE RIGHT TO SIGHT

Rabat, Morocco, 26 April 2004

Your Excellency, Ladies and Gentleman,

It gives me great pleasure to share with you this historic occasion, the launch in Morocco of Vision 2020 – The Right to Sight, a global initiative to eliminate avoidable blindness. I would like to extend our appreciation to His Royal Highness Prince Abdulaziz bin Ahmed Al Saud, Regional Chairman of the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB/EMR) as well as His Excellency Dr Mohamed Cheikh Biadillah, Minister of Health, for their presence and support.

Vision is the most important of our senses, the majority of our day-to-day activities being vision-related. Many find it difficult to comprehend what it would be like to lead a life without sight. Blind persons need assistance to carry out daily routines, and often become

dependent on their families, creating an economic burden for the community, society and ultimately the country.

There are currently an estimated 50 million blind people around the world, and 180 million people with visual impairment. Two-thirds of these conditions are either preventable or curable. Every year an additional two million are added to the number of blind and if we do not take active steps now, the number is projected to increase to 75 million by 2020, our target date for elimination of avoidable blindness.

In the Eastern Mediterranean Region an estimated 6 million people are blind and over 22 million people suffer from visual impairment. Of these, four and half million people, or around 80%, live in nine countries, mainly with large populations, low income and relatively weak health care infrastructures.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Blindness has profound human and socioeconomic consequences in all societies. The cost of lost productivity, rehabilitation and education of the blind constitutes a significant economic burden, and particularly so in developing countries. Furthermore, blindness is often associated with lower life expectancy. Spending on blindness prevention programmes is therefore a worthwhile investment, morally, socially and economically.

In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, cataract, glaucoma, complications of trachoma, uncorrected refractive errors, low vision, childhood blindness and diabetic retinopathy are major causes of blindness. Cataract remains the major cause of blindness in almost all countries of the Region, including Morocco. Most cataract conditions are responsive to simple treatment, yet very few have access to such treatment. For example, it is estimated that corrective cataract surgery is available to only 40% of those suffering from cataract. At the recommendation of HRH Prince Abdulaziz Bin Ahmed Al Saud, many countries have committed themselves to addressing urgently the backlog in cataract surgery as part of action towards the prevention of blindness in the Region.

Trachoma continues to be a major global and regional cause of avoidable blindness. Elimination of blinding trachoma is a priority for the Eastern Mediterranean Region under the WHO Alliance for the Global Elimination of Blinding Trachoma (GET 2020) and Vision 2020. Great possibilities in eliminating this disease have already been demonstrated in Morocco, where a national trachoma elimination programme has brought together trachoma experts from all over the world and 2005 has been set as the target date for the elimination of trachoma. I strongly believe that many countries with known problems of blinding trachoma will follow the path of Morocco, utilizing its experience and that of its partners and implementing the components of the so-called SAFE strategy, i.e. surgery, antibiotics treatment, facial cleanliness and environmental change. The Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean will work with all countries and interested organizations to achieve the goal of global elimination of blinding trachoma as a cause of preventable blindness by 2020.

Refractive errors and low vision also need to be addressed. Approximately 20 million people in the Region are in need of care for these conditions. This number will increase as populations age. In many of our countries low vision care needs to be developed and supply of low vision screening equipment increased. The Regional Office is encouraging countries in the Region to form a network for training human resources and to establish these services.

Glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy and childhood blindness also need attention.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In 1999, WHO, in partnership with IAPB, and other nongovernmental organizations, launched regional Vision 2020 initiatives. The goal of these initiatives has been to address the major preventable or treatable causes of blindness, particularly in developing countries, in order to stop further increase in the global burden of blindness. Vision 2020 aims to intensify and accelerate the current prevention of blindness activities in order to achieve the goal of eliminating avoidable blindness by 2020. This initiative was strengthened by resolution WHA56.26, passed by the World Health Assembly in May 2003 and which urged Member States to commit themselves to supporting the initiative by developing national

plans and allocating additional resources. Five conditions have been identified as immediate global priorities within the framework of Vision 2020: cataract, trachoma, onchocerciasis, childhood blindness, and refractive errors and low vision.

At the last regional meeting, held in Cairo, Member States were recommended to help each other to develop national plans of action for Vision 2020, to identify priorities, and to allocate additional resources to blindness prevention in collaboration with WHO, the International Agency for Prevention of Blindness (IAPB) and local and international organizations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I note that Morocco has taken important steps to enhance the current prevention of blindness activities by launching the national initiative of Vision 2020 to reduce the incidence of avoidable blindness. The achievement so far in eliminating trachoma can be replicated in other areas of blindness, especially cataract and other causes of avoidable blindness, and since substantial progress has already taken place I look forward to achievement of the goal of Vision 2020 in Morocco before the target date.

Once again, I would like to thank all those present today, especially His Excellency the Minister of Health for his continued support of the programme, and to thank the Chairman of IAPB and the International Initiative for the Prevention of Avoidable Disability (IMPACT/EMR), His Royal Highness Prince Abdulaziz Bin Ahmed Al Saud, for his personal efforts and support to Member States in implementing Vision 2020. Last but not least, I would like to thank IAPB and the national and international nongovernmental organizations that have played such a significant role in supporting Vision 2020 in this Region.

Finally let me assure you of the full support of the Regional Office in implementing the Vision 2020 initiative in Morocco.

God bless you all.