



*In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful*

**Address by**

**DR HUSSEIN A. GEZAIRY**

**REGIONAL DIRECTOR**

**WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION**

**to the**

**LAUNCH OF VISION 2020 – RIGHT TO SIGHT**

**Cairo, Egypt, 17-19 December 2002**

Your Excellency, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to share with you this historic occasion, the launch of the global initiative Vision 2020–Right to Sight, to eliminate avoidable blindness in Egypt, upon the kind invitation of H.E. Dr Mohammed Awad Afifi Tag-El-Din.

As we all know, vision is certainly the most important of our senses and the majority of our day-to-day activities are vision-related. Many find it difficult to comprehend what would it be like to lead a life without vision; blind persons need assistance to carry out routines of daily life, and become dependent on their families, creating an economic burden for the community, society and ultimately the country.

Unfortunately, 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. If we do not take an active step, these numbers will double within the next 25 years.

In the Eastern Mediterranean Region an estimated 6 million people are blind and over 20 million people suffer from visual impairment. Among these, four and half million people, or around 80% of the blind population, live in nine countries, mainly with large populations, low income and relatively weak health care infrastructures. Some of those countries are also facing the consequences of war and civil strife.

A recent survey in Menoufia by Al Noor Foundation has shown a high prevalence rate of blindness and visual impairment in Egypt, with a high prevalence of active trachoma among children.

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, particularly in many developing countries. Furthermore, blindness is often associated with lower life expectancy. Spending on blindness prevention programmes is a worthwhile investment.

In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, cataract, complications of trachoma, uncorrected refractive error, low vision, glaucoma, 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 Egypt. Most of these 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 30% 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 recommended action towards the prevention of blindness in the Region.

Trachoma continues to be another global and regional cause of preventable blindness. Elimination of blinding trachoma is a priority for the Eastern Mediterranean Region under the WHO Alliance for the Global Elimination of Trachoma (GET 2020). Great possibilities in eliminating this problem have already been demonstrated in Morocco, where a national trachoma elimination programme recently brought together trachoma experts from all over the world. Oman has also established programmes for the elimination of trachoma. In Saudi Arabia, the prevalence of active trachoma has been reduced and efforts are now under way to eliminate the disease. In Egypt, the International Trachoma Initiative (ITI) has initiated a control programme in collaboration with the national authorities. The Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean will coordinate with countries and with other organizations to achieve the goal of global elimination of trachoma as a cause of preventable blindness.

Refractive error and low vision also need to be addressed. Approximately 20 million people in our Region are in need of treatment for these conditions. This number will increase as populations age. Childhood blindness is also a priority; recently, five countries in the Region, including Egypt, have been identified to start childhood blindness prevention programmes, with the support of Lions Clubs International.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In 1999 WHO, in partnership with the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness, IMPACT-EMR, Al Noor Foundation, Al Bassar Foundation and other nongovernmental organizations, launched Vision 2020–Right to Sight. The goal of this initiative is to address the major preventable or treatable causes of blindness, particularly in developing countries, in order to stop a further increase in the global burden of blindness. Vision 2020 aims to intensify and accelerate the current prevention of blindness activities to achieve the goal of eliminating avoidable blindness by 2020. Five conditions have been identified as immediate priorities within the framework of Vision

2020: cataract, trachoma, onchocerciasis, childhood blindness, and refractive errors and low vision.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The launch of Vision 2020 in Bahrain, Egypt, Lebanon, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Republic of Yemen are strong indications of national commitment to eliminating avoidable blindness.

To enhance the current prevention of blindness activities in Egypt, the Regional Office has supported activities such as training of ophthalmologists from all governorates for cataract microsurgery, screening of schoolchildren for refractive error and low vision in Cairo, training of primary health care workers for primary eye care in Menoufia and Kafr al Sheikh and supply of basic eye care equipment for district hospitals.

It must be noted that Egypt has a large number of human resources, especially ophthalmologists. Through proper planning and utilization of these resources we can achieve the goal of Vision 2020, reducing the incidence of avoidable blindness, even before the year 2020. It is my hope that other countries of the Region will soon launch national Vision 2020 initiatives in line with the global initiative to prevent blindness.

Finally, I would like to thank all those present at this historic occasion, especially the Chairman of IMPACT-EMR , HRH Prince Abdulaziz Bin Ahmed Al Saud, for their efforts and support to countries in implementing Vision 2020. Al Noor Foundation and Al Bassar Foundation are also playing a significant role in supporting Vision 2020 in this Region.

On behalf of the Regional Office, I can assure you of all possible support in implementing the components of Vision 2020 in Egypt.

God bless you all.

