

TITLE: Seventy-third Session of the WHO Regional Committee for South-East Asia, New Delhi, India, 9-10 September 2020

SUBTITLE: A Summary Report by the Chairperson, H.E. Mr Anutin Charnvirakul, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Health, Royal Thai Government

The Seventy-third Session of the WHO Regional Committee for South-East Asia was held virtually, with Thailand as the host, on 9–10 September 2020. This was due to the global restrictions imposed due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The Regional Committee unanimously elected His Excellency Mr Anutin Charnvirakul, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Health, Royal Thai Government, as Chairperson of the Seventy-third Session. His Excellency Mr Bhanu Bhakta Dhakal, Minister of Health and Population, Government of Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal, was elected Vice-Chairperson. The Committee also decided to adopt Special Procedures that included the provision of considering several of the Agenda items under a “Written Silence Procedure” due to the short duration of the Session, with live plenary discussions not being held for said Agenda items. Due to the special considerations entailed by the virtual session and the absence of a plenary, the Resolution Drafting Group was not formed to discuss resolutions and decisions at the Seventy-third Session. “Special Procedures” covered aspects of attendance, addressing the Regional Committee, submission of Credentials, decision-making procedures and preparation and adoption of the report of the Session. Member States presented their views through written interventions on many of the Agenda items. These Special Procedures to regulate the conduct of the Seventy-third Session of the WHO Regional Committee for South-East Asia were accepted by all Member States ahead of the Session by consensus. A decision *SEA/RC73(1)*¹ was adopted in this regard. Due to the virtual conduct of the Session, the final draft report of the Seventy-third Session of the Regional Committee for South-East Asia was circulated among Member States online and their comments and approval invited.

PART 1: TOPICS FOR GLOBAL DISCUSSION

- **WHO Transformation:** The Secretariat provided the Committee with the draft report from WHO headquarters on “Transforming for enhanced country impact”, outlining the ways in which the Secretariat is transforming across the three levels of the Organization to enhance impact at the country level. In addition, the report from the Director-General titled “WHO Transformation: An overview” was also presented. Furthermore, the Secretariat presented the Committee with an overview of the progress made in advancing the Region’s attainment of the priorities of the Transformation Agenda in tandem with those of the Regional Director’s Flagship Programmes. Updates from the SEA Region focused on various initiatives including country support, governance, strengthened transparency and accountability.

¹ <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/334245/sea-rc73-decisions-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

The Committee congratulated the Regional Director for her continued commitment and strong leadership in furthering the public health agenda in the Region, and for supporting Member States with her efforts to strengthen the capacity of WHO country offices to work with implementing partners to deliver on country and global public health priorities. The Committee observed that the Member States of the SEA Region have benefited from the evolving discussions on the Country Cooperation Strategies as well as the funding support to the countries during the current COVID-19 pandemic and to the health sector at large.

- **Development of a draft global patient safety action plan:** Regarding the Global Patient Safety Action Plan (GPSAP), the Committee expressed support and requested the Regional Director to convene a Regional Consultation with Member States and other stakeholders to consider the draft Global Patient Safety Action Plan, to prioritize regional actions that are aligned with the Regional Strategy and country-specific contexts. The Committee adopted the decision *SEA/RC73(2)*² in this regard.
- **Development of the programme budget 2022–2023:** This agenda was not discussed as a separate item in the agenda. It was included under the agenda “Programme Budget 2020–2021: Implementation”. Moving forward, the Committee stressed the need to regain momentum to implement planned activities in the 2020–2021 biennial workplans while at the same time continuing with the response to COVID-19. Increasing the quality of financing to align resources with priorities and reprogramming and repurposing workplans as necessary in the context of the evolving situation, was stressed further. The Committee also expressed interest in remaining informed about and engaged in the process of developing the Programme Budget 2022–2023.

PART 2: TOPICS OF REGIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

- **Ministerial Roundtable on COVID-19:** This agenda comprised of two sub-items namely “*Country experiences and lessons learnt with future transition to the ‘new normal’*” and “*Maintaining essential health services and public health programme in the context of COVID-19*”. The resolution *SEA/RC73/1*³ was adopted by the Committee endorsing the “*WHO South-East Asia Region Member States’ Declaration on Collective Response to COVID-19*”. It urged the Member States to implement the Ministerial Declaration and requested the Regional Director to report on progress on the implementation of the Declaration to the Regional Committee every three years until 2026.

² <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/334245/sea-rc73-decisions-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

³ <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/334243/sea-rc73-r1-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

- **Decade for health workforce strengthening in SEA Region 2015–2024: mid-term review of progress, challenges, capacities and opportunities:** The latest publication – titled *Decade for health workforce strengthening in the South-East Asia Region 2015–2024: mid-term review of progress, 2020*⁴ was launched. It highlighted the regionwide progress made on human resources for health in Member States of the SEA Region at the mid-point of the Decade for health workforce strengthening. The 2020 report, for the first time, included data on primary health care workers beyond doctors, nurses, midwives, dentists and pharmacists. It also included a section on the health workforce in the context of COVID-19, and on nursing and midwifery and country profiles with updated HRH data reported by Member States. In addition, the Secretariat in collaboration with Member States had produced a report on *Improving retention of health workers in rural and remote areas: Case studies from the WHO South-East Asia Region*⁵. This report presented good practices on successful rural retention policies in six countries of the Region, namely, Bhutan, India (state of Chhattisgarh), Indonesia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand. The Committee requested the WHO Secretariat to produce the fourth progress report on the Decade for health workforce strengthening in 2022. The Committee requested support from WHO to address some of the health workforce challenges in the Region during the second half of the Decade, such as improving the availability and distribution of health workers in Member States, improving the quality of pre- and in-service education and training, improving the strategic and planning capacity of HRH units, and the development and implementation of HRH strategies and enhancement of the HRH information systems.
- **Annual report on monitoring progress on UHC and health-related SDGs:** The Seventieth session of the Regional Committee for South-East Asia requested the Regional Director to include “Annual report on monitoring progress on UHC and health-related SDGs” as a substantive Agenda item until 2030 (*Decision SEA/RC70(1)*⁶). The latest publication – titled *Monitoring progress on universal health coverage and the health-related Sustainable Development Goals in the South-East Asia Region, 2020*⁷ – was launched. It highlighted the regionwide progress made on UHC and the health-related SDGs in Member States based on the available data. The Committee commended the Annual Report of 2020 and reiterated the importance of achieving UHC and making tangible progress towards achieving SDG3 and the GPW13 Triple Billion Targets even during the phase of COVID-19 response and recovery. The Committee noted the importance of continued support from WHO to assist with achieving the UHC and SDG goals and for increasing institutional capacities to analyse the data and populate the indicators using appropriate methods.
- **Time and place of future Sessions of the Regional Committee:** The decision *SEA/RC73(3)*⁸ was adopted by the Committee on this agenda.

⁴ <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/334226>

⁵ <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/334227?show=full>

⁶ <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/259577/RC70-Decisions.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y>

⁷ <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/334213>

⁸ <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/334245/sea-rc73-decisions-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

During the Regional Committee meeting, physical activity sessions of 3-minute energizers were held on both days. Video footage on stretching exercises at the desk were broadcast during these sessions. On second day, morning exercises for 40 minutes were broadcast from SEARO at 8:00 AM (Bangkok time) on social media platforms (Facebook and YouTube), with contributions from India, Myanmar, Thailand and Timor-Leste.

Following side events were also held:

1. Side event on Public Health Achievements in the Region was held on 10/9/2020, following the conclusion of the Ministerial Roundtable in which four SEA Member States were felicitated for public health achievements. **Maldives** and **Sri Lanka** were awarded for eliminating rubella. They emerged as the first two countries to eliminate rubella in the WHO South-East Asia Region ahead of the scheduled target year for elimination of 2023. **Myanmar** was awarded for eliminating trachoma, following in quick succession after Nepal's elimination of the disease in 2018. **Sri Lanka** was awarded for eliminating mother-to-child transmission of HIV and syphilis.
2. Video-launch of WHO SEARO Publications was held immediately after the above side event. Fifteen regional publications were launched during this side event.

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