



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Message from
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WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION
to
INTERCOUNTRY MEETING ON THE PROGRESS OF
MEMBER STATES OF THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION
TOWARDS IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL HEALTH
REGULATIONS 2005 AND ASSESSMENT OF NEEDS
Aleppo, Syrian Arab Republic, 24–27 November 2008

Dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to this intercountry meeting on the progress of Member States of the Eastern Mediterranean Region towards implementation of the International Health Regulations 2005 (IHR 2005) and assessment of needs. It is my pleasure to thank H.E. Dr Maher Al-Housami, Minister of Health, Syrian Arab Republic for hosting this meeting. I would like to express my great appreciation to our colleagues from WHO headquarters in Geneva, who have joined us to share their experience in maintaining surveillance and response for public health emergencies of international concern and current progress towards implementation of IHR 2005. I would also like to extend a special word of welcome to our colleagues from the US Naval Medical Research Unit Three (NAMRU-3), UNICEF, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and World Food Programme.

Recent decades have seen the emergence of new disease challenges for national and international public health. New and re-emerging epidemic risks have been compounded by concerns about potential dissemination of chemical or radioactive substances which also jeopardize international health security. The Regional Office has a vision: “Our Region must be prepared to respond rapidly to any emerging or re-emerging disease threats”. The earlier a

disease threat is identified, the easier it is to contain. With the extension of global air travel, neglected local disease threats can quickly spread and become global emergencies.

Working closely with its global and regional partners, the regional communicable disease surveillance and response programme aims to contribute to global health security through following three strategic directions: implementation of IHR (2005); developing and strengthening specific surveillance and response networks to contain known risks associated with leading epidemic and emerging diseases; and preventing and responding to unexpected outbreaks rapidly and effectively through timely alert and response mechanisms.

The IHR 2005 were discussed by WHO Member States and adopted by the World Health Assembly in May 2005. The Regulations entered into legal force across the planet in June 2007, and are now legally binding upon 194 States. The Regulations are intended to prevent and respond to the international spread of disease through: 1) international coordination assessment and response activities (with the central role of WHO), 2) international reporting (to WHO) of serious public health events with potential international implications; 3) requirements for all countries to develop national core public health capacities for detection and response (and other health capacities); and 4) extensive legal rules applicable to international movement of travellers, transportation, goods and other items.

With the many new obligations and rights of Member States under the Regulation, it is recommended to assess existing national core capacities for surveillance and response as well as requirements for designated ports of entry, as indicated in Annex 1 of IHR (2005). Basic elements of this assessment could include, for example, whether there are aspects of the Regulations which are not sufficiently developed for their implementation. The key is that the Member State is able to comply with and implement the IHR 2005 provisions that all countries have agreed to.

The role of the Regional Office is supportive to Member States in reinforcing their commitment to efficient implementation of the Regulations. Implementing IHR (2005) will strengthen national and collective defences coordinated by WHO against these serious risks that are increasingly transmitted internationally due to expanded global travel and commercial exchanges.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There are additional efforts initiated and supported by the Regional Office to boost capacities of Member States in upgrading their national surveillance systems for communicable diseases. The Regional Office has conducted a series of sub-regional training workshops for building national and regional capacity for early detection and rapid response to outbreaks of emerging diseases, especially to outbreaks of avian influenza. A regional roster of trained and skilled experts is being created to strengthen the regional capacity in responding to emerging and re-emerging disease threats and in supporting Member States to complete their assessment of core capacities for surveillance and response, as per Annex 1 of the Regulations. The Regional Office, in collaboration with WHO headquarters, has completed the required tools for the assessment of core capacities needed for the implementation of IHR (2005). A regional plan of action was developed by the Regional Office for this purpose. A Strategic Health Operations Centre (SHOC) has been launched to strengthen the capacity of the Regional Office for early detection and response to outbreaks of communicable diseases, with excellent computing services and advanced technology in tele- and video-communications.

Dear Colleagues,

I would like to thank you all again, and ask all of you to gain the utmost benefit of this meeting through sound discussions, exchange of ideas and clear planning for building capacity and for strengthening surveillance activities for the proper implementation of IHR (2005). I wish you all a successful meeting and a pleasant stay in Aleppo.