In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Address by

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to the
INTERCOUNTRY MEETING OF COUNTRIES WITH A HIGH BURDEN OF TUBERCULOSIS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

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Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Colleagues,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to this Intercountry Meeting of Countries with a High Burden of Tuberculosis in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. I wish first to extend my sincere thanks to the Government of Lebanon for its kind offer to host this meeting and to His Excellency Dr Karam Shokrallah Karam, Minister of Public Health, for honouring us with his presence today to inaugurate the meeting.

This is a meeting for the nine countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region with a high burden of tuberculosis, accounting for 94% of the incidence of tuberculosis in the Region. This is the first time in the Region that such a meeting has been held and I take this
opportunity to welcome the national managers of tuberculosis control programmes and representatives of the private health sector and nongovernmental organizations from these countries to this meeting. A special welcome goes to the Under-secretaries and the Directors General from the Ministries of Health of the participating countries. The presence of such high-level decision-makers of the Ministries of Health from the participating countries is extremely important for the success of the meeting and control of tuberculosis.

Dear Colleagues,

I am sure you are fully aware of the considerable progress made in tuberculosis control in the Region during the last few years. The Regional Office, in close collaboration with the Member States, has formulated a regional plan for tuberculosis control. It aims to achieve nationwide implementation of the WHO tuberculosis control strategy of Directly Observed Treatment, Short-course, or DOTS ALL OVER, in all countries by the end of 2000, and tuberculosis elimination in the countries with low incidence in the Region by 2010. The plan was thoroughly discussed and endorsed by the Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean in 1997. I am pleased to inform you that this is the first regional initiative of this kind in the field of tuberculosis control in the world.

In accordance with the regional plan, numerous activities have been enthusiastically conducted throughout the Region. The activities have included human resources development, review of national tuberculosis programmes, strengthening of tuberculosis laboratory services, strengthening of tuberculosis surveillance capacity, dissemination of WHO documents, advocacy for the DOTS strategy and intersectoral collaboration.

Through these activities, considerable momentum has been generated among the technical leaders of tuberculosis control, namely the national managers of tuberculosis control programmes, in the Region. One of the WHO Representatives in the Region stated, when he witnessed the collaborative work of the national managers, that their strong team spirit reminded him of the enthusiasm that prevailed among the health personnel who dedicated themselves to the smallpox eradication campaign in the 1960s and 1970s.
As a result of the enthusiastic activities, we have observed remarkable progress in the field of tuberculosis control in the Region. To date, seven countries have already achieved DOTS ALL OVER. Among the other 16 countries in the Region, eight countries are rapidly expanding DOTS projects and at present covering more than 30% of their total population. The remaining eight countries are lagging in DOTS implementation, covering less than 10% of their population by DOTS projects; however they have launched DOTS demonstration projects. It is important to note that all DOTS projects in the Region have achieved successful results in terms of smear conversion rates and treatment success rates. The experiences in the Region clearly indicate that the DOTS strategy can be implemented in many different situations and can achieve remarkable results, once effective political commitment and strong leadership are secured.

As you know, at the beginning of this week, all national managers of tuberculosis control programmes in the countries of the Region joined in their annual meeting and prepared national plans of action for the next biennium, namely 2000 and 2001. I am pleased to inform you that once the national plans of action have been implemented as scheduled, almost all the countries in the Region are expected to achieve DOTS ALL OVER during the next biennium, if not earlier.

Dear Colleagues,

With due appreciation of the current progress, I must emphasize that DOTS ALL OVER still poses an enormous challenge to us. More than 90% of the regional population live in countries where the DOTS strategy is not fully implemented. More important is the fact that the eight countries that are lagging in DOTS implementation, namely countries where DOTS coverage is still less than 10%, account for 44% of the regional population and 62% of the regional tuberculosis incidence. Therefore, DOTS projects in the Region will need very rapid expansion to achieve DOTS ALL OVER by the end of 2000. I would like to remind you that we have only 18 months to achieve DOTS ALL OVER.

One of the main reasons for the overall low coverage of DOTS in the Region is the insufficient DOTS expansion particularly in eight of the nine countries with a large burden of tuberculosis, despite the fact that 94% of the tuberculosis cases come from these nine
countries. DOTS coverage in these high burden countries is not sufficient to produce effect, except for Morocco which achieved DOTS ALL OVER a long time ago. I must say that, unless major efforts are made in these countries in a relatively short period, the Region will continue to see an increase in incidence of and mortality from tuberculosis in the coming decades. This is why we decided to convene the meeting for these nine countries with a high burden of tuberculosis in the Region.

This meeting has three main objectives. One is a critical review of the tuberculosis control situation in the nine countries. The review will focus on progress and challenges in seven important areas of work in tuberculosis control, namely political commitment, technical leadership, tuberculosis control under unstable social situations, intersectoral collaboration in particular with the private health sector, control of anti-tuberculosis drugs, tuberculosis control among cross-border migrant populations and collaboration with donors. By the end of the review, we expect to have clear and comprehensive ideas on the current progress, constraints in tuberculosis control and proposed solutions in the high burden countries.

Based on the review results, each participating country is expected to develop a comprehensive national plan of action to achieve DOTS ALL OVER by the end of 2000 and the global targets of tuberculosis control. This comprehensive plan is aimed to supplement the national plans of action prepared by the national managers of tuberculosis control programmes in their annual meeting held at the beginning of this week. The comprehensive plan should clearly state the commitment of the Ministry of Health concerned. To facilitate the preparation of the plan, there will be a session on the new WHO initiative on tuberculosis control, namely the STOP TB Initiative.

It is also expected that, by the end of the meeting, practical and comprehensive recommendations will have been developed by the participants. The recommendations should clearly indicate important issues necessary for all the nine countries with a high burden of tuberculosis so as to achieve DOTS ALL OVER in due course.

In view of the above objectives, we invited high-level decision makers of the Ministries of Health in the nine countries to this meeting, in addition to the national
managers of tuberculosis control programmes, representatives of the private health sector and of nongovernmental organizations. It goes without saying that strong and effective commitment of the participants is essential to real success in tuberculosis control in the participating countries.

I sincerely hope that the meeting will provide an excellent opportunity to assist the nine countries with a high burden of tuberculosis in the Region to accomplish DOTS ALL OVER in due course. Please allow me to reiterate at the end of my address that we have just 18 months to achieve DOTS ALL OVER. All of us here, senior decision-makers, national managers of programmes, the private sector, nongovernmental organizations and WHO, are obliged to be committed to this strategy. We owe it to the populations of our countries to rid them of this unjustifiable burden of tuberculosis. I am aware that you have a full programme ahead of you. I wish you a successful meeting and a pleasant stay in Beirut.