Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to this key meeting on the International Health Regulations.

The last major revision of these Regulations was completed in 1969. During the ensuing 30 years, international health risks have changed drastically. New diseases have emerged and shown their capacity to spread globally in a matter of days, and they continue to emerge; some existing ones have become a much greater threat than they were; others have disappeared or are close to eradication or elimination.

As your governments have been saying insistently for some time, through the World Health Assembly, we urgently need common reference points to deal effectively with the health threats of the twenty-first century.

In recent months, 12 regional and subregional meetings have drawn together work on the Regulations that has been going on for several years. I thank all of you who have participated in that hard work. I also congratulate you on having kept the revision process on schedule. We are on course for the adoption of the revised regulations at the next World Health Assembly six months from now, in May 2005.

This target was set by the Fifty-sixth World Health Assembly in 2003. The discussions here over the next 12 days give us the opportunity to meet it. By doing so, we will provide our Member States with the long-awaited common reference points they need to coordinate their response to health threats in a practical way.

Experience in recent years, especially with severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and avian influenza, has taught Member States and WHO a great deal about how to work together to prevent and contain outbreaks. The revisions in the Regulations reflect that experience.
The effectiveness of the Regulations will depend on our ability to build structures and systems that support their application. Work on developing the necessary information-sharing and decision-making technology has been going forward simultaneously with yours on revising the Regulations. The nerve centre of our global alert and response activities is the Strategic Health Operations Centre, a state-of-the-art facility here in Geneva. I am happy to announce that this facility is now fully operational. I encourage you to visit it and to find out how it can support your national alert and response systems.

In the coming days, we will be working to get the Regulations as right as they possibly can be for all Member States. Some flexibility within the Regulations will help in reaching agreement. Also, in years to come, as the health situation continues to change, the Health Assembly will make the necessary adaptations.

We owe it to the people of the world to be prepared for global threats and to do everything possible to minimize or eliminate them. This meeting is our opportunity to fulfil that obligation. Our Secretariat team will be on hand to support you in this work in every way it can.

On behalf of all who will benefit, I would like to thank you for your very valuable contributions and wish us every success. Thank you.