

Address by Her Royal Highness Princess Lalla Salma to the Sixty-fifth World Health Assembly

Geneva, Tuesday, 22 May 2012

Praise be to God. May peace and blessings be upon the Prophet, His Kith and Kin. Madam President, Madam Director-General, your excellencies, ladies and gentlemen.

I should like, first of all, to say how proud I am to take part in the Sixty-fifth World Health Assembly.

The privilege of being a Goodwill Ambassador for this prestigious Organization, which is a key player in global health issues when it comes to vigilance, guidance, expertise and assessment, makes me even more proud.

This session, which is being attended by representatives of all United Nations' Member States, and which is being held just a few months after the High-level Meeting on Non-communicable Diseases,¹ is of particular importance both in terms of the items on its agenda and the recommendations it is expected to come up with.

Noncommunicable diseases like cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases account for 63% of all deaths.

It matters little what we call these diseases, or whether we consider them to be modern-time illnesses. What matters is the fact that they constitute a challenge which must be our highest priority. They require urgent, decisive measures to curb them. In the present circumstances of global financial turmoil and sweeping political changes, I personally believe that investing our human material and intellectual resources and energies in the health sector is the only guaranteed investment that will bring about optimal solutions to the problems we are currently facing.

To this end, we need to adopt an integrated policy as well as a comprehensive, efficient approach in order to ease the suffering of patients.

Ladies and gentlemen, under the leadership of His Majesty King Mohammed VI, Morocco has been devoting special attention to the health sector in view of the fact that human resources are our country's most valuable asset and the key lever for the nation's development and progress.

¹ United Nations High-Level Meeting on Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases, New York, 19–21 September 2011.

Budgetary resources allocated to the health sector have increased significantly in recent years in such areas as investment, the purchase of drugs and the training of human resources, like doctors, nurses and medical assistants.

In this regard, I should like to point out that after the adoption of a compulsory health insurance scheme for public and private sector employees, His Majesty King Mohammed VI launched a medical assistance plan in March 2012 for the benefit of impoverished populations and people in a precarious financial situation.

Based on national solidarity and a partnership in particular with local governments and the associations concerned, the plan gives more than 25% of Morocco's population access to all health care services provided by public hospitals and health centres. Thus, by the grace of the Almighty, Morocco now covers the medical needs of approximately 70% of the population.

Morocco has focused its efforts on fighting cancer. Thus, it has adopted an ambitious national plan in which the Association I am privileged to chair¹ has been involved. The Association has been taking care of all sectors relating to combating cancer: prevention, treatment, support for patients, training of specialized personnel and scientific research. As a result we now have 13 oncology centres – instead of four previously – and 24 particle accelerators, instead of four. We have achieved this in just six years.

The national plan has also enabled us to set up several “homes of life”, which are designed to accommodate patients and their relatives, provide drugs for a large number of cancer patients, and bear the treatment costs for 90% of child cancer patients and for all women suffering from breast cancer.

Cancer prevention is one of the main goals the Association seeks to achieve, particularly through the fight against smoking. The programme launched by the Association in cooperation with the Ministry of Education for the benefit of young people shows the special importance the Association attaches to sensitizing the citizens and enhancing their awareness of the dangers of the disease.

The results achieved would not have been possible had it not been for His Majesty King Mohammed VI's keen interest in the programmes designed to fight the deadly scourge of cancer, and for his strong support for the efforts made in the area.

Ladies and gentlemen, as you know, cancer has calamitous consequences, particularly in the countries of the South where, regrettably, the situation is getting worse. In fact, the number of cancer patients is bound to increase and lead to even more deaths unless we address this scourge through a comprehensive cooperative plan.

This plight, which is unacceptable from both the humanitarian and ethical standpoints, should be of great concern to us all: politicians, drug companies and civil society organizations. It makes it incumbent upon us to shoulder our responsibilities in this regard.

The number of deaths each day, the tragic circumstances faced by the families that lose a loved one – who is sometimes the only breadwinner – and the adverse effects of this disease on society as a

¹ The Lalla Salma Association for the Fight against Cancer.

whole should induce us to make the fight against this scourge a defining issue for mankind – not just a vague aspiration or a temporary campaign.

Given the seriousness of this scourge, we should make the fight against cancer an international priority at all levels: a priority in terms of sensitization and awareness; a priority in terms of prevention; a priority in the area of detection and early screening; a priority in terms of access to treatment, and a priority in the field of training and scientific research.

It is only through concrete action that we can achieve the above objectives and reduce the glaring disparities in the fight against the disease which exist between the North and the South and between the countries of the South themselves. I do not think anyone can accept that the cure rate for child cancer patients is 85% in some advanced countries, whereas children with cancer in a number of developing countries receive no care at all. We must therefore, insist on the need to democratize cancer prevention methods and access to treatment.

For this reason, plans for joint action ought to be developed and implemented, building on the efforts of all the actors concerned, particularly the World Health Organization and all its Member States. WHO will undoubtedly be keen to support such a collective aspiration and make the fight against this deadly scourge a global priority.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am sure we all realize cancer is not inevitable.

Morocco's untiring efforts in the fight against cancer – despite its limited resources – clearly show that an integrated, participatory approach that brings together the stakeholders concerned – public authorities, professionals, civil society, the families and the media – has every chance of leading to positive, tangible results.

For this reason, the Association I chair has opted for partnership as a strategic policy choice to curb the spread of cancer and tackle the negative effects of the disease. This approach is not restricted to the national actors involved; we have also been using it in our cooperation with sister nations in Africa and the Middle East.

In this regard, I should like to remind you that the “Marrakech Call”, which was endorsed by the International Conference on Cancer Control in the Middle East and Africa (Marrakech, 12–14 January 2012) stressed the need to adopt various partnership mechanisms and to strengthen South–South cooperation between governments and civil society organizations in the region. The Conference also called for mechanisms for the joint purchasing of cancer drugs to be established, and for a regional Middle-East and Africa fund for cancer prevention and treatment to be set up.

The Marrakech Call thus supported the proposal I made at the High-Level Meeting held in September 2011 to create an international cancer fund – similar to the HIV-AIDS fund – to confirm the international community's commitment to fighting cancer and thus give concrete meaning to the collective responsibility we all feel is ours.

In support of this proposal, which I should like to reiterate today, and consistent with the recommendation of the Marrakech Call, the World Health Organization could set up an “international cancer drug observatory” to enable Member States to have access to information on cancer drug prices and quality, competent drug manufacturers and any other information that can be of benefit to patients and their families, or facilitate access to medication and treatment.

The vast experience gained by the World Health Organization as the competent authority in charge of coordination and management of global health issues, its support for scientific research and the training of human resources, coupled with the financial resources that could be made available to the said fund, are factors which should bring about a quantum leap in tackling cancer.

I have no doubt in my mind that the active involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of these proposals will contribute to making the fight against cancer an international priority, providing the basis for collective, efficient endeavours.

Before concluding, I would like to pay tribute to Her Excellency Dr Margaret Chan, Director-General of WHO, and express my appreciation for her committed efforts towards achieving the Organization's objectives and improving health conditions around the world. I wish her continued success in her lofty mission.

Thank you.

Wassalamu alaikum warahmatullah wabarakatuh.

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