Statement by H. E. Mr. Zahid Maleque, MP, Hon’ble Minister for Health and Family Welfare, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh at 73rd World Health Assembly
Date: 18 May 2020, Time: 16:00-19:00 hrs

Mr. President,
Hon’ble Health Ministers,
Director-General Dr. Tedros,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, we are attending the first-ever historic virtual Assembly in the face of alarming levels of spread and severity of COVID-19. At this critical juncture, we reiterate our firm commitment to stand together in the spirit of global solidarity to defeat the pandemic. We express our condolences and sympathy to the families of victims. We also thank Dr. Tedros and his team for their continued tireless efforts during this global crisis. We salute the health professionals and health workers for their noble contribution and sacrifice.

Since the inception of the outbreak, our Government was quick to respond under the able leadership of our Hon’ble Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. At a recent conference arranged by the World Economic Forum, she said, and I quote, “We will need a new kind of approach: An approach that fosters cooperation and not isolation amongst all stakeholders.” Unquote.

True to this spirit, we have adopted a “Whole-of-the-Government” approach giving emphasis on surveillance and laboratory support, tracing and screening, infection prevention control, community engagement as well as logistics and procurement. We have adopted a ‘National Preparedness and Response Plan for COVID-19’ in line with WHO’s Global Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan. We are finalizing the UN suggested country response plan to address the adverse impacts.

We have set up a National Committee and a Technical Committee while a number of committees constituted at district and sub-national levels. Prime Minister herself is closely monitoring the situation and regularly provides guidance to these committees through consultation with the National and Technical committees.

In case of institutional response, we have prepared a number of isolation centers and dedicated hospitals and trained our health workers in COVID-19 case management. Our private sector is supporting us by creating thousands of extra hospital beds. For better management, we have newly recruited additional 2,000 physicians and 4,500 nurses.

Apart from 130 Social Safety Net programmes, our Prime Minister has announced a USD 11.60 billion package for various sectors to keep the economy moving. Our Government is providing direct cash assistance to 50 million people. 1.1 million Rohingyas that we are hosting are also included in our overall strategy.

Mr. President,

Collective efforts involving all countries and relevant actors are needed in this response. Hence, I wish to place some suggestions for international community and WHO:

First, we need new thinking on human wellbeing and on how to tackle inequality, support the poor and get our economies back on track.
Second, assistance should be rendered to low- and middle-income countries in strengthening their health systems and addressing the negative consequences.

Third, WHO should advocate for ensuring equitable and affordable access to medicines and vaccines once those are available.

Fourth, migrants irrespective of status deserve more attention in the response as they are disproportionately affected. They should not be forced to return.

Fifth, we must not forget our commitment to achieve the SDGs including UHC as well as to ensure improved nutrition for all, while fighting the pandemic.

Sixth, it is crucial to assess the correlation between health determinants and climate change in the context of COVID-19.

Seventh, we need to develop innovative and digital health solutions to better prepare for the future.

And finally, to ensure a robust multilateral system led by the UN, centering around WHO, remains key in this global public health response.

Mr. President,

2020 is a special year to our nation as it marks the birth centenary of our Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. We believe, eradicating COVID-19 is the best gift to our nation and to the world on this historic occasion.

Thank you.

***