

Video message to the Eastern-Mediterranean Regional Committee

I thank the government of Oman for hosting this sixtieth session of the Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean.

Many visitors to Oman come here because of the country's beauty and the hospitality of its people. Others come here to learn, especially about the country's health system and the remarkable results it has produced.

One of the most encouraging trends in public health today is the growing number of countries that have made universal health coverage their goal.

This is a strong endorsement of the need for fairness in access to quality health care.

Universal health coverage is one of the most powerful social equalizers among all policy choices.

It is also a commitment to protect populations from the financial ruin that is so often caused by out-of-pocket payments for health care.

Universal health coverage stresses the need for a comprehensive range of services, including prevention.

This emphasis on prevention is critically important as the region addresses its growing burden of noncommunicable diseases.

The UN Political Declaration on NCDs clearly states that prevention must be the cornerstone of the global response to these diseases.

As your Regional Director has noted, information and awareness campaigns will be needed to tackle the harm that arises from the adoption of unhealthy lifestyles.

During this session, you will discuss the unfinished MDG agenda, and most especially the need to accelerate efforts to save the lives of mothers and children.

You will consider the place of health in the post-2015 development agenda.

On issues of health security, you will look at progress in implementing the International Health Regulations at a time when the Region is aware of the need for vigilance as the new coronavirus continues to emerge.

Polio eradication remains a top concern in the Region. I urge you not to lose heart.

I am very encouraged by the Regional Director's steps to support countries where the virus is still circulating and to promote advocacy and communication in this area.

Governments and their citizens must be on board and convinced of the benefits of finishing the job.

I know the humanitarian situation in Syria and in other countries will be on your minds, especially when you discuss the item on emergencies and the impact of the Syrian crisis on health systems in neighbouring countries.

As you have just heard, the health situation in Syria is dire, and it is deteriorating. Around half of the country's hospitals have been damaged or destroyed.

Under current conditions, more than two million people in urgent need of humanitarian assistance cannot be reached.

More than two million Syrians have left the country to seek refuge in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt. The burden on health services and economies of neighbouring countries is increasing.

Earlier this month, the UN Security Council unanimously and urgently called on all parties to allow humanitarian access to all areas of the country to deliver desperately needed humanitarian assistance.

WHO stands ready to do its part in providing health assistance.

I wish you a most productive meeting.