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In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Message from

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REGIONAL DIRECTOR

WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

to the

**REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON WATER SUPPLY
AND SANITATION IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION**

Beirut, Lebanon, 11 - 15 December 1995

Your Excellency, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the Regional Conference on Water Supply and Sanitation in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. I wish to take this opportunity to thank the Government of Lebanon for hosting this Conference and for the significant support extended to it. Also, I wish to express my sincere thanks to His Excellency Mr Marwan Hamada, the Minister of Health, for attending and addressing this important gathering.

Dear Colleagues

I do not need to emphasize to you the important link between sanitation and health, particularly water-borne diseases. Every eight seconds a child dies from a water-related disease. Every year more than five million human beings die from illness linked to unsafe drinking water, unclean domestic environments and improper disposal of excreta. At any given time, perhaps half of all the people in the developing world are suffering from one or more of the six main diseases associated with inadequate

water supply and sanitation: diarrhoea, ascariasis, dracunculiasis, hookworm, schistosomiasis and trachoma. In addition, the health burden includes the expenditure, every year, of 10 million person-years of time and effort by women and girls carrying water from distant, often polluted sources.

In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, major strides have been made by the national authorities to provide people with water supply and sanitation. At the end of 1994 approximately 71% of people were served with water supply but only 55% had access to sanitation facilities. This means that 122 million are still without access to safe water and 190 million are without sanitation. The most serious problem is the low level of coverage of people with sanitation facilities in the rural areas.

The countries of the Region can be classified into three categories: first, those countries, which to all intents and purposes have reached full coverage of their population with water supply and sanitation. These countries are Bahrain, Cyprus, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, and to certain extent Saudi Arabia and Jordan.

The second group of countries—Egypt, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia—have shown very impressive progress in the past 10 to 15 years in their population with water supply and sanitation facilities. However, serious work lies ahead in order to achieve the targets.

The third category of countries—Afghanistan, Djibouti, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen—are the least developed with respect to water supply and sanitation. In this group major efforts are needed to improve the situation.

The overall priorities of water supply and sanitation sector in the Region are: to establish adequate sewerage schemes in the cities; drastically improve rural sanitation; reduce leakage and wastage in water supply systems; and make the provision of both water and sanitation financially self- sufficient.

As you all know, the people whose health is most adversely affected by the lack of safe water supply and sanitation facilities are the poor and needy. Considering the devastating impact of unsafe water and inadequate sanitation on poor infants and children, it is vital that the principle of equity and social justice should prevail. Providing the poor, needy and underprivileged with safe water and sanitation is no longer a sectoral target, it is a moral imperative. The civilized world can no longer shed its responsibility and remain passive and irresolute when millions of young children are dying from preventable diseases because of bad sanitation.

To discharge our moral responsibility, we must be realistic and recognize the problems and obstacles. Water is an economic commodity and has a price, and users have to pay for it. This economic principle may bring the moral responsibility in conflict with financial realities. Many governments do not have the resources and the means to provide all of their citizens with the required services. Also, since the end of the International Water Supply and Sanitation Decade, the international focus on the subject has become blurred. Furthermore, there is a general consensus that the level of investment in water supply and sanitation has fallen. Therefore, the challenge is how to reconcile the needs with available resources.

In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, we have arrived at a critical stage. Water is scarce, and our Region has a rapid rate of population increase. Most national economic development plans have set ambitious goals for industrial, agricultural and urban development, all needing more water. Therefore, the water crisis will become even more acute. It is not possible to separate water supply from the overall issue of water resources. Hence, in the light of what is needed, the financial resources available, water scarcity, and institutional and social issues, the formidable challenge is how to provide water supply and sanitation to all people, in the shortest possible time.

Dear Colleagues

This Conference is being held to consider this challenge. It is necessary to give careful attention to issues of water conservation, including treated wastewater reuse, financing, beneficiaries' participation, and sustainability, which are crucially relevant to conditions in our Region. The main objective of the Conference is to review the status of water supply and sanitation and put forward measures for strengthening the capacity and capabilities of national programmes to provide sustainable services to all.

I am sure you will pay careful attention to the critical issues just mentioned: I urge you to focus especially on sanitation. Please consider how to take advantage of the "healthy cities" and "healthy villages" frameworks for the improvement of water supply and sanitation, especially among the poor. The WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, as a focal point and in collaboration with WHO headquarters, is preparing a new framework for global collaborative activities on sanitation. I invite you to take a lead on sanitation in your respective countries.

I am looking forward with interest to hearing your conclusions and recommendations and your innovative ideas and plans.

I wish you a successful conference and hope you have a pleasant time in the beautiful city of Beirut.

