

Opening Address by

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WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

to the

SIXTY-SIXTH SESSION OF THE WHO REGIONAL COMMITTEE

Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran, 14–17 October 2019

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

His Excellency Dr Hassan Rouhani, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Your Excellencies Members of the Regional Committee

My dear brother Dr Tedros Adhanom, WHO Director-General

Excellencies heads of diplomatic missions

Honourable representatives of United Nations agencies and community organizations

Dear brothers and sisters

Peace and blessings be upon you

Allah the Almighty says in the Glorious Quran: “And say ‘Do [as you will], for Allah will see your deeds, and so will His Messenger and the believers’. Allah speaks the truth.

Let me start by extending my sincere thanks and heartfelt appreciation to His Excellency President Hassan Rouhani and to the people and leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran for hosting the 66th session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean here in Tehran – this beautiful and renowned city in the Islamic Republic of Iran, which combines revered civilization with a modern spirit and is distinguished by the hospitality of its people. Tehran offers us everything that a venue can contribute to a successful Regional Committee session.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It has been a year since we last met, in Khartoum – a memorable event during which we adopted important resolutions intended to serve our Region. Throughout the past year, we encountered challenges, but every challenge was an opportunity to learn. It was an eventful year full of work that helped increase our knowledge, enhance our skills and consolidate our experiences in addressing those challenges. Embracing challenges and learning from them is very much in keeping with our vision for the region, *Vision 2023: Health for all by all*, which you endorsed at last year's session.

Excellencies, esteemed guests,

Our annual meeting is of paramount importance. It is a chance to review recent health developments and achievements in our Region during the year, share successful experiences, enhance collaboration and further expand our horizons for work in the Region and beyond. Moreover, this meeting serves as an opportunity to reiterate that health is and always will be a right for all, because we firmly believe that health is a key prerequisite for, and not a product of, development. Realization of health will significantly and positively affect the productivity of individuals and communities and raise their educational and living standards.

This stance is underlined by health stakeholders in international fora. I recently attended the first United Nations High-level Meeting on Universal Health Coverage (UHC), which concluded with the adoption of a Political Declaration on UHC. We hope that this Declaration will encourage all of us to continue our commitment to UHC in our countries.

Excellencies, brothers and sisters,

We live in a Region that has rich history, civilizations and heritage and enjoys a unique geographical location, climate and natural and human wealth. Regrettably, however, the health

status of people in the Region is deteriorating severely due to conflict, natural disasters, epidemics and political strife, with negative consequences for the level of provision and availability of health services in some countries in the Region. I have visited 20 countries of the Region; I went to many health facilities and saw conditions that can only be described as catastrophic.

In one country, I saw three infants sharing the same bed in an emergency department, waiting many days for anesthetization.

In another country, a 50-year-old man breathed his last in the emergency ward because it did not have the necessary treatment to save his life.

Next to him lay another man whose sons took turns pumping the air into his lungs for days on end because no beds were available in the intensive care unit.

I met a 4-year-old boy who travels 5 hours by car with his mother every two weeks to have a dose of chemotherapy, the cost of which is borne entirely by the family.

I saw a 30-year-old man with renal failure dying due to unsuccessful renal dialysis.

In another country, I saw the one and only child infected with poliomyelitis, a disease that has been eradicated all over the world except in our Region.

I held a 10-month-old baby infected with HIV, though the parents are HIV free.

In other countries, I held a 4-year-old girl who looked like a 6-month-old baby due to malnutrition. I met a 6-year-old girl who looked like a 100-year-old woman, again due to malnutrition. In one of my visits, I saw a mother who suffered from malnutrition. She had three children closely spaced, the youngest of whom was an infant. I met a doctor who worked 24/7 in a cholera treatment centre and passed away some days later because of that very disease.

Distinguished sisters and brothers,

This health situation in our Region is grim, but we should not lose sight of the commendable efforts that many people and organizations are making in response.

On one of my visits, I met a medical team who stood for hours to complete a complex surgical operation that required the utmost degree of attention and precision, despite the scarce resources, limited capabilities and challenging conditions in their health facility. Happily, the patient recovered.

I met health workers who covered miles on foot to vaccinate a group of children in a remote village, putting their own lives at risk.

I held a 3-year-old child who was on the verge of death because of malnutrition when her parents brought her to a therapeutic feeding centre. Three weeks later, she was fully recovered and had a big smile on her face – as did her parents and the health workers.

I was jubilant to meet a retired obstetrician who still reported to the hospital regularly to help the understaffed medical team.

I met a group of senior health practitioners from our blessed Region who, after retirement, with vast experience in their respective specializations, insist on using their experience and qualifications in the service of the Region and its people, setting a great example for us all in shouldering this national, humanitarian and ethical duty.

And I met health leaders in a number of hospitals and primary health care centres who radiate optimism and contentment, though their hospitals and centres are overcrowded day and night and have very limited financial and human resources.

I have witnessed outstanding examples of community participation in health services engaging all segments of society. Such experiences are the true embodiment of our regional vision of “Health for all, by all”. I learned of projects that are being implemented in creative and innovative ways to save time, effort and money.

So, sisters and brothers, we have examples of how we can actually change the dismal reality of health in our Region and overcome the challenges, difficulties and negative factors we face. Together, we can turn the situation around.

Just a few days ago, elimination of measles in the Islamic Republic of Iran was certified by the Regional Verification Commission (RVC) for Measles and Rubella Elimination in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. In May 2019, the RVC declared that measles and rubella have been eliminated from both Bahrain and Oman. This great achievement shows the impact that we can achieve. I would like to congratulate the Governments and people of these countries for this remarkable achievement, and to thank all those who contributed to it.

We, at WHO, have begun to work with a positive spirit and have clearly articulated our vision of what our Region could be in 2023 – a vision you welcomed at the last Regional Committee session. You encouraged us to take it further and we have done so. In the current session, we will present to you the next step – our regional strategy for the period 2020–2023 – which will hopefully translate words into action and theory into practice.

The regional strategy outlines the key strategic objectives that we intend to deliver in relation to each of the priorities set out in *Vision 2023*. It also identifies the directions that we can pursue to achieve each strategic objective. We are very keen to ensure that the strategy includes a clear mechanism to identify the results achieved and measure the impact of these interventions. Let me assure you that we will work tirelessly and in innovative ways to implement most of the 10 priority initiatives identified in *Vision 2023* for immediate action in the first 12 months.

Honourable sisters and brothers,

We have an ethical, professional, humanitarian and religious duty. The Prophet said: “The relationship of the believer with another believer is like [the bricks of] a building, each strengthens the other.” And: “The parable of the believers in relation to the kindness, mercy and compassion they have for each other, is that of the body: when an organ of it falls ill, the rest of the body responds with fever and sleeplessness.”

Saadi Shirazi, also known here as the poet of humanity or Master of Speech, wrote:

Sons of Adam are part of one single body,

They are created of the same essence.

When the calamity of time afflicts one part

All other parts feel it too.

So it is imperative upon us all to show solidarity and work together to serve this Region, achieve its health-related goals and establish health systems that empower every citizen to obtain their full health rights without discrimination, negligence or financial hardship.

We very much hope that this session will help us achieve coherence, brotherhood and solidarity to move further forward together and improve the health status of countries in the Region. There were some very useful discussions in the pre-RC technical meetings yesterday, and now we look forward to a busy three-day agenda, as well as side events, covering a wide range of important health issues for our Region.

We have introduced many new ideas in the way we are conducting this year’s session. We are using more videos and animations during events. We also decided to make this the first

paperless RC session: all documents are available electronically via various platforms. And we have organized an exhibition of success stories featuring every country of the Region.

Dear sisters and brothers,

I have no doubt that the issues on our agenda are important to everyone working on public health in our Region, so I hope that everyone will contribute to inform and enrich the discussion so that we elicit the appropriate recommendations and adopt effective resolutions that help us drive the change required in each country of our Region, in line with our vision of “Health for all, by all”.

In conclusion, I would like once again to thank the Islamic Republic of Iran for the cordial reception, hospitality and excellent care we have received at every stage in preparing for and conducting this session.

I would also like to thank all members of the Programme Subcommittee of the Regional Committee as well as my colleagues at the WHO Regional Office and our country office here in the Islamic Republic of Iran, all of whom have worked hard to develop the agenda and prepare for an RC session that will, I hope, prove a significant step in implementing different health programmes and the regional strategy.

At all three levels of WHO, we assure you of our determination to provide the maximum technical support to ensure that Goal 3 and other health-related goals of the Sustainable Development Goals are achieved in collaboration with various governmental and civil society institutions, and in partnership with other United Nations agencies. I wish you all success, for the good of this Region and its people.

I would like to conclude with a verse from the Holy Quran in which Allah Almighty says: “And whoever saves one [soul] – it is as if he had saved mankind entirely.”

You are serving your countries and your people by improving their health and saving lives. You are saving mankind entirely. This is an honour for us all and I pray Allah to help us on this path.

Let our motto always be:

Salamat Baraye Hameh - Hameh Baraye Salamat [Health for all – All for health]

Ba Sepas

Thank you.