Statement by Dr Nata Menabde, Executive Director, WHO office at the UN

Member States briefing on the Syria Response [Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP), Neighbouring Countries]
United Nations, New York
12 January 2016

Excellencies, distinguished colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, the World Health Organization and its partners remain committed to supporting efforts to respond to the critical health needs of the millions of people affected by the conflict inside and outside of Syria.

Key health issues/situation
After almost five years of conflict, the population is more vulnerable than ever, particularly to disease outbreaks and malnutrition. Lack of basic utility services including electricity, fuel, safe drinking water and basic sanitation services have increased the vulnerability to disease outbreaks such as diarrheal diseases, typhoid, hepatitis A, as well as other vaccine preventable diseases. An estimated 57% of health facilities and 51% of public health centres are either partially functional or closed.

People with life-threatening chronic diseases such as diabetes, kidney failure, asthma, epilepsy, cancer and cardiovascular illness are at an increased risk of dying or developing complications as access to lifesaving medications and care is becoming more difficult. A severe shortage in skilled-birth attendants, including obstetricians, means that there are major obstacles to providing care to an estimated 300 000 women who are pregnant and need targeted support. Current estimates indicate 600 000 people are living with severe mental illness in Syria. One in four children is at risk of developing mental health disorders.

Essential health services have been further disrupted by decreasing numbers of available health professionals, which have dropped to 45% of pre-crisis levels, a 70% drop in local production of pharmaceuticals, and a 50% increase in prices of locally produced pharmaceuticals.

Outside the country, Syrian refugees’ resources are depleted and they are even less resistant to infection after protracted periods of poor sanitation and nutrition. The spread of communicable diseases continues to rise, especially among the elderly and children.

Aid must be allowed to reach all people in need, particularly to deliver essential health assistance. WHO fully supports the recent UN resolutions and all efforts to bring peace to Syria and solve the refugee crisis.

More attacks on health than ever
2015 saw the most attacks on health care workers in Syria since the conflict began. Over 640 health care workers have been killed since the crisis started. In addition, 2015 was the worst so far for blatant attacks on medical facilities in Syria. Protection of health workers, facilities and transport must be ensured.

WHO condemns continued attacks on health workers, civilians and health infrastructure. All parties must take responsibility in protecting health workers, civilians and health infrastructure. In times of crisis, it is vital that health facilities continue to function and medical staffs are allowed to provide medical care to patients without any risk. Patients must continue to receive medical attention and health professionals must be able to deliver health services in a safe and secure environment.

WHO and partner efforts inside Syria and beyond
WHO and partners continue to support 13.5 million people in need within Syria. In 2015, WHO dispatched trucks carrying medical aid providing over 17.2 million treatments throughout the year across the country. In addition, WHO has shipped medical supplies in hard-to-reach areas through cross-line and cross-border means including airlifts. With winter’s arrival, WHO Syria has prepositioned many essential medicines and supplies across most
governorates to make treatment of winter-related diseases accessible to populations in need as well as distributed influenza vaccines as a preparedness mechanism.

In December 2015, WHO delivered over 779,552 life-saving and life-sustaining treatments across 8 governorates, despite increased security challenges. In March 2015, WHO donated 44 mobile clinics to different partners to serve the hard-to-reach and underserved populations inside Syria. In October 2015, WHO supported a five-day nationwide immunization campaign in Syria which vaccinated 2.3 million children against polio.

WHO also set up an Early Warning Alert and Response System in 2012 to rapidly detect and respond to signals indicating outbreaks and clusters of epidemic-prone diseases with 104 initial sentinel sites. The system has now been expanded and currently covers 995 sites, including the Ministry of Health, private physicians and nongovernmental organization health facilities, and 30% of which are in hard-to-reach and besieged areas.

To reach people in need in hard-to-reach areas, WHO has partnered with 63 local NGOs, one-third of which are working in opposition-controlled areas. WHO has also decentralized its presence in Syria through a system of 57 medical focal points, including 36 in hard-to-reach and besieged areas. In the second quarter of 2015, WHO delivered medicines and supplies for more than 400,000 people across conflict lines to hard-to-reach areas in Aleppo, Da’ra, Deir ez-Zor, Homs and Rural Damascus.

Across the five countries included in the regional refugee and resilience plan, WHO is working with Ministries of Health and different partners to provide much-needed health care for Syrian refugees. The sheer demand for health services places enormous strain on public health infrastructure, and has resulted in overwhelming patient caseloads, overworked health staff and shortages of medicines and equipment. Cholera has been a major concern for the region following an outbreak in Iraq in September 2015.

Still our efforts to support some 4.4 million Syrian refugees across the region and beyond continue. For example, a group of Syrian nurses in Turkey received training in September 2015 to help them integrate into the Turkish health system. This allowed these nurses to serve their fellow displaced Syrians. And thanks to the efforts by many partners, the Middle East polio outbreak was closed in October 2015, following a two year regional response that vaccinated more than 27 million children under five years of age in eight countries.

Health priorities and funding requirements in 2016

In 2016, the priority in the health sector is to provide life-saving and life-sustaining humanitarian health assistance to affected people. Within Syria, the health sector needs nearly USD 440 million to reach some 11.5 million people with health care services. Last year, the WHO Syria office estimated that for every US$ 1 million missing from their response budget, 227,640 people missed essential health care services.

Regional response targets for 2016 aim to reach refugees in nearby countries, including a target to hold nearly 5 million consultations in primary health care services, train almost 15,000 health care staff and vaccinate nearly 18 million children against polio.

This is just a sample of the work being carried out by WHO and our partners. We’re working together to promote resilience and provide sustainable solutions to the health aspects of this protracted crisis. But to continue to carry out this important work, we need your support. Indeed, in 2015, the health sector received less than 40% of funds needed for the Syria crisis. Last year, WHO’s humanitarian operations for Syria faced a funding gap of $98 million. This gap led to an increased number of preventable deaths.

Finally, WHO would like to thank our supporters especially Australia, Canada, China, UN Central Emergency Response Fund, the European Union, Finland, Ireland, Italy, Hungary, Kuwait, the League of Arab States, Luxembourg, Norway, the Republic of Korea, Russia, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom and the United States, for their financial support to our health programmes for Syria in the past. We count on your continued cooperation and support for WHO and the health cluster partners. WHO looks forward to participating in the Syria Donors Conference in London next month, and we call upon all Member States to continue their support for the efforts of WHO and its partners to help the millions of Syrian people.

Thank you