

Statement on COVID-19 by WHO's Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean

Dear colleagues,

As of 12 September 2021, the Eastern Mediterranean Region has reported more than 15 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and more than 278,000 deaths.

Over the past few weeks, we have seen the overall number of cases and deaths in our Region decline, but the situation remains fragile and unpredictable. Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have seen the trends evolve in waves, so despite recent decline in our Region over recent weeks, this pandemic is still far from over.

Five of 22 countries in our Region -- Egypt, the occupied Palestinian territory, Somalia, the Syrian Arab Republic, and Yemen -- are currently reporting significant surges in COVID-19 cases and deaths. Looking closely at the epidemiological curve, there is a need to speed up the vaccination process and continue to respect all public health and social measures in all countries.

Low vaccination coverage in several countries, especially low- and lower-middle income countries is also of concern due to limited deployment capacities. Unfortunately, this means that nine countries are far from achieving WHO's global target of 10% vaccination coverage by September 2021.

Variants of concerns continue to pose further challenges to our response. To date, 21 countries have officially reported the detection of circulating variants of concern, and the Delta variant is most likely the main variant currently circulating in our Region.

Based on evolving trends over the past months, we have seen that countries with a high vaccination coverage and adequate implementation of public health and social measures report shorter waves of COVID-19 and fewer cases.

There are no shortcuts. We can break the chain of COVID-19 transmission only when we apply all available measures at once. We must quickly and effectively scale up vaccination coverage and simultaneously apply all other preventative health and social measures, including maintaining physical distancing, handwashing, avoiding crowded and closed spaces, and mask-wearing.

Ahead of potential COVID-19 surges, we continue to work closely with countries in the Region to upgrade their surveillance, sequencing, and testing mechanisms to prevent and better respond to these surges.

We call for solidarity and equitable access to vaccines, to move towards the target of all countries protecting 10% of their population by September, 40% by the end of this year and 70% by mid of next year. While we know that the targets for 2021 will not be met in all countries, we must do our absolute best to come as close as possible and then to accelerate our efforts further in the months ahead.

Under WHO's goal of Universal Health Coverage, the most vulnerable people, including migrants, refugees, and other displaced populations, must have access to vaccines. Many countries have included these vulnerable groups in their national vaccination plans, and we urge the international community to scale up support to host countries so that they can provide equitable access to COVID-19 care and vaccines.

Thanks to the COVAX facility, the Region has received 51.54 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines out of 89 million doses allocated to countries so far. To increase coverage further, we urge high-income countries, donors and partners to spare no effort to increase vaccine supplies for lower-income countries.

COVID-19 has caused much grief and loss. It has placed unprecedented challenges on the capacity of humanitarian agencies and countries. It is now more crucial than ever to work collaboratively, utilize all resources, and implement all available preventative tools so we do not lose more chances to defeat this pandemic.