

74th Session of the Regional Committee
WHO South-East Asia Region,
Regional Director's Inaugural Address
6 September 2021

- Your Excellency, Mr Sher Bahadur Deuba, Hon'ble Prime Minister, Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal,
- Mr Umesh Shrestha, Hon'ble Minister of State, Ministry of Health and Population, Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal;
- Dr Tedros, Director-General, WHO;
- Hon'ble Ministers of Health from countries of the WHO South-East Asia Region;
- colleagues from the international community and from across WHO;
- distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to add my words of welcome to the 74th session of the Regional Committee for the WHO South-East Asia Region.

For the second year in a row, we meet in virtual session. My special thanks go to our hosts, the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal for helping to make this happen.

I know that everyone here will join me in looking forward to the time when we can all meet again in person.

Getting there – by which I mean returning to a more normal world – is the challenge that underpins *everything* we will be discussing at this meeting.

Getting there will not be easy.

Getting there means fighting on many fronts.

It means retaining a sense of optimism and confidence about what we can achieve when we work together.

But it also requires honesty about the magnitude and nature of the challenges we face.

We are seeing success as more than half a billion doses of covid-19 vaccines are administered across the Region. We have seen resource sharing between countries.

We are on the way towards the goal of having 10% of the population fully vaccinated by the end of this month, and 40% by year's end.

But progress is highly unequal within the Region, and even more so across a world where 75% of vaccines have been administered by less than a dozen countries.

The task of vaccinating the whole adult population in any country is a task of enormous complexity. It is harder still when vaccine supplies are uncertain, sporadic, and dependent on donations of different products each with its own requirements.

Covid has taken a massive toll on our health systems. This is what I mean by fighting on many fronts.

Services have been disrupted and health care workers are exhausted. The pandemic has increased demand for mental health care and for treatment of NCDs. Childhood vaccination has been disrupted.

Lockdowns have established their own patterns of morbidity.

Our challenge is multi-faceted: We have to *regain* lost ground in terms of health outcomes; we must *rebuild* health systems that have lost capacity; and we must *restore* trust where it has been lost...

...And, the biggest challenge of all: we have to do this at a time when government revenues in *all* countries will be under intense pressure.

Advocacy for health – which realistically means asking for a greater share of government spending – has to be at the heart of our discussions with ministries of finance if we are to sustain progress toward universal health coverage.

Excellencies,

We have learned much over the last year. We have lived through false dawns when we thought the worst was over.

We have learned to expect the unexpected.

We have learned that vaccines alone are essential but not sufficient. We have seen the damage caused by more transmissible variants and understand the risk that more could be on the way.

We have learned more about preparedness. We have always known it is about good information, about logistics and supplies, about training and planning.

But the pandemic has taught us more.

It has taught us that preparedness means being ready to make difficult decisions quickly and with limited information.

It has shown the need for strong leadership and trust between governments and the people they serve – and the dangers that can befall us when these are lacking.

I express my heartfelt gratitude to doctors, nurses and all health care workers who have toiled hard and gone beyond their call of duty to respond to the pandemic.

Covid 19 has shown us beyond any possible doubt the importance and the fragility of international solidarity.

Excellencies, dear friends and colleagues.

As we are virtually (and spiritually) in Nepal, let me put it this way: we have a mountain to climb, and we have a long trek ahead to reach the summit. Few rest-stops and much of the trail will be *ukalo* (uphill).

But we can put this pandemic behind us.

Working together, supporting each other, seeking solidarity and cooperation over competition. In WHO we will do all in our power to support you.

Thank you.