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Noncommunicable diseases threaten economies in South-East Asia Region

28 February, Jakarta: Noncommunicable diseases such as cancers, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and chronic respiratory diseases cause 3 out of 5 deaths in WHO's South-East Asia Region, some 8 million people annually. Since these diseases are closely linked to poverty, they pose a serious public health threat to the Region and also impede development. For instance in India, eliminating noncommunicable diseases would increase the GDP by 4-10% according to the World Bank.

More than 22% of deaths worldwide due to noncommunicable diseases occur in the 11 countries in WHO's South-East Asia Region. A third of these deaths are expected to be among middleaged adults under the age of 60 years. This epidemic of noncommunicable diseases can be largely prevented through cost-effective public health measures.

"Noncommunicable diseases pose a threat to the global economy and are impoverishing to both families and individuals. These diseases are the major cause of poverty at the individual and household level," said Dr Samlee Plianbangchang, WHO's Regional Director for South-East Asia. "Diabetes, hypertension, stroke and cardiovascular diseases have increased in the Region. Costly in terms of long-term care, they demand a type of social and financial investment that many countries will have difficulty making unless they quickly begin to re-prioritize their efforts and funding", he added.

Many of these diseases can be prevented, delayed or alleviated through simple lifestyle changes. By improving diet, increasing physical activity and quitting smoking, 80% of heart diseases and stroke, 80% of type 2 diabetes and 40% of cancers can be prevented. 150 minutes of moderate physical activity a week could reduce the risk of ischemic heart disease by 30%, the risk of diabetes by 27% and the risk of breast and colon cancer by 21-25%. Preventing noncommunicable diseases is cheaper than treating them.

The UN General Assembly will convene a High-level Meeting in September 2011 to galvanize action to halt premature deaths from noncommunicable diseases. WHO is organizing a Regional Consultation for Member States between 1 and 4 March 2011 in Jakarta, Indonesia to prepare for the General Assembly Meeting.

Raising the priority of noncommunicable diseases in health and development plans has been one of the key priorities of WHO. The signs are clear and urgent action is needed now to reverse the threat posed by noncommunicable diseases.

What: Regional Meeting on Health and Development Challenges of Noncommunicable Diseases
When: 1-4 March 2011
Where: Jakarta, Indonesia

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