

Opening Address by

***Dr Samlee Plianbangchang
Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia***

At the

***Regional Consultation High-level Ministerial Meeting
2012: Year of Intensification of Routine
Immunization in South-East Asia Region***

***2 August 2011,
New Delhi, India***

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Excellency, Mr Ghulam Nabi Azad, Minister of Health and Family Welfare, the Government of India; excellencies; Dr E. Hoekstra – UNICEF; Mr Steve Steward – CDC, USA; Mr Ashok Alexander – Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation; Dr M.S. Sawhney – Rotary International; national programme managers; members of the Regional Technical Advisory Group; representatives of other partner organizations; colleagues and guests; ladies and gentlemen;

I warmly welcome you all to this High-Level Ministerial Meeting to deliberate upon the theme on: “2012: Year of Intensification of Routine Immunization in South-East Asia Region”. This meeting will also be followed by the Regional Meeting of “EPI Managers”. I also welcome you all to this regional meeting of EPI Managers. I thank all participants for sparing their valuable time to attend the meetings. I particularly thank Excellency, Mr Ghulam Nabi Azad, Honorable Minister of Health and Family Welfare, the Government of India, for agreeing to inaugurate the meetings.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

The coverage of routine immunization in SEAR still remains relatively low, compared with other WHO Regions. Furthermore, as far as coverage of routine immunization in South-East Asia is concerned, there are still disparities between countries; and these disparities exist among States, provinces and districts within the same countries. We have to work harder in order to achieve “universal” and “uniform” coverage of routine immunization in children in the Region. High and sustained coverage of routine immunization is needed to help “accelerate” the achievements of targets set for elimination or eradication of certain vaccine-preventable diseases, such as polio and measles. Also, we need high and sustained coverage of routine immunization to ensure long-term “maintenance” of gains from specific disease elimination and eradication of VPDs. The current estimate of coverage of routine immunization in SEAR is currently at 73%. It is relatively very low. We may expect our “intensified efforts” during 2012 to contribute to an acceleration of this rate. Routine immunization in this context means primarily the six basic antigens. However, if any governments would like to add more antigens other than these six in their routine immunization, WHO will be very happy to support the governments’ decision in this regard. Several countries in the Region have already added hepatitis B vaccination in their routine immunization.

Excellencies,

Even though widely recognized as the most cost-effective public health interventions against infectious diseases, many vaccines, including those for the six basic antigens, are not available to children; especially the children in developing world who need them most. Over 10 million vulnerable children in SEAR, accounting for 25% of the world's children, do not receive a complete course of vaccination against diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis (DTP3) during their first year of life. Each year, worldwide, an estimated number of 1.5 to 2 million children die due to VPDs. Out of this number, 25%-30% deaths occur in SEAR. These are really premature deaths among our future generations. Immunization not only prevents infectious diseases but also contributes to the quality of life of children. Access to safe and effective vaccines is a basic right of all children. We, together, should help ensure this right; at least for routine immunization. If we are truly to engage in the efforts to increase and sustain routine immunization coverage for all children, unwavering commitments are needed from all partners and stakeholders. We are here to collectively affirm our commitment to translate our "intent" into "actions", the actions to intensify routine immunization in countries of SEAR during 2012 - the actions that can lead to effective protection of our children from common childhood diseases.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As I said, following this high-level ministerial meeting, there will be a regional meeting of "EPI managers" to review and discuss various issues relating to national

immunization programmes. The deliberations on those issues will lead to further improvement in the development and management of national immunization programmes.

With these words, excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, I wish these two meetings all success.

Thank you.