

Address at the Inaugural Session

by

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

at

***Tenth Meeting of the Health Secretaries of the
Countries of WHO South-East Asia Region***

***Hotel Pan Pacific Sonargaon, Dhaka, Bangladesh
3-4 July 2005***

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REGIONAL DIRECTOR, WHO SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Excellency, Dr Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain, Minister of Health and Family Welfare, People's Republic of Bangladesh;

Mr A.F.M. Sarwar Kamal, Secretary, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, People's Republic of Bangladesh;

Excellencies;

Honourable Health Secretaries;

Ladies and gentlemen;

- This is the tenth annual meeting of health secretaries of the countries of WHO South-East Asia Region.
- I gratefully thank the honourable health secretaries for sparing their valuable time to attend the meeting.
- I also thank the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh and its Ministry of Health and Family Welfare for hosting the meeting.
- Excellencies, the annual meetings of health secretaries have proved very productive during the past 10 years.
- This is particularly so with regard to the contribution from the meetings to the work of WHO in the South-East Asia Region.
- The health secretaries, who normally attend the World Health Assembly and the session of the WHO Regional Committee, can effectively link the work of these bodies with that of their respective ministries.
- Therefore, the health secretaries can play an important role in the work of the Organization at national, regional and global levels.
- Their regular dialogue on the issues of common interest will take them a long way in contributing to effective intercountry cooperation.

- This was the reason for starting the annual meetings of health secretaries in 1996.
- Ladies and gentlemen, 2005 is a busy year for the health sector in the South-East Asia Region.
- We have to devote special efforts to reach certain goals established by the World Health Assembly by the end of this year, particularly with regard to:-
 - Polio eradication;
 - Leprosy elimination; and
 - Treatment targets for Tuberculosis.
- At the same time, we have to contain outbreaks of several communicable diseases, such as malaria, diarrhoea, dengue fever and encephalitis.
- In addition, we have been overwhelmed by the severe damage and destruction caused by earthquakes and the Tsunami of 26 December 2004.
- However, countries in the Region have tackled these challenges in the most efficient and effective manner.
- Most of these disease outbreaks have been controlled, without much difficulty.
- And we can say with pride that with capable and prompt action by the governments of the affected countries, there were no disease outbreaks due to the earthquakes and the Tsunami.

- Ladies and gentlemen, there is clear evidence that during the past few decades, countries in this Region have made significant progress in health development.
- Increasingly, health concern in countries has become a public and political issue.
- More and more, many sectors and professionals other than health have come forward to share responsibility for health development.
- To achieve health-for-all, it is necessary therefore, to fully involve all stakeholders and partners in facing health challenges.

- Excellencies, allow me to say a few words on the achievements in the health in our host country.

- In Bangladesh, during the past few years, many things have changed in the health area.
- The country's environment, in general, is much cleaner, with less air pollution in the city of Dhaka.
- The people, in general, look healthier and livelier.
- On reviewing the health situation, it is evident that the country's health infrastructure has been strengthened significantly.
- More importantly, mortality and morbidity due to many communicable diseases have come down amazingly.
- While the average life expectancy at birth increased to 64 years in 2003 from 44 in 1971, the crude death rate dropped from 17 per 1,000 population in 1973 to 4.8 in 2001.
- There was a remarkable drop in under-five mortality from 151 per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 82 in 2001.
- Bangladesh has made very good progress in health within a rather short time span.
- The Government must therefore be congratulated for its commendable efforts in the country's health development.

- Excellencies, honourable health secretaries, allow me to take this opportunity also to follow up with you the implementation of WHO's regional strategy on decentralization in the South-East Asia Region.
- This is the action we have taken on an Organization-wide policy.
- This strategy is to ensure, among others, the realization of WHO's country focus and WHO's country specific approach in the Region.
- After one year from the start of initiation of the strategy, an assessment was done.
- The result showed progresses in a number of areas.
- At the same time, a number of deficiencies and shortfalls were also identified.
- On the basis of this assessment, we are now moving further by building on the successes achieved, and rectifying those deficiencies and shortfalls.
- In this decentralization exercise, ladies and gentlemen, we, as WHO staff, always keep asking ourselves, "what benefits have countries in the Region got from WHO's work, or will get?"

- This will serve as a reminder to us in WHO to constantly monitor and evaluate our work, and take necessary steps to ensure useful contributions to the countries' health development.
- Please be assured, Excellencies, that despite all kinds of constraints that we are facing, WHO in SEAR will continue doing its best in serving the Member States.
- Ladies and gentlemen, I am confident that the deliberations of the health secretaries on various agenda items during the course of this meeting will be productive as usual.
- All of us stand to benefit from their combined wisdom.
- The advice and guidance that will emanate from the meeting will take us a long way towards more productive cooperation among countries.
- Finally, let me thank, once again, the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh and its Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, for graciously hosting this meeting, and for the excellent arrangements made.
- I wish the meeting all success, and the participants a pleasant stay in Dhaka.
- Thank you.