IOAC group statement to the Seventy-seventh World Health Assembly

1. Thank you, Mr Chairman. Honourable ministers, excellencies, heads of delegation, Director-General, and distinguished colleagues. I am honoured to present document A77/7 to the World Health Assembly on behalf of the Independent Oversight and Advisory Committee for the WHO Health Emergencies Programme – IOAC. This is the twelfth annual report of our committee.

2. In 2023, WHO responded to 72 graded emergencies and the number will be likely to increase due to climate change, conflicts, natural disasters, rising threats from new pathogens, and more. Last year, the IOAC observed a steep increase in humanitarian health needs on a global scale and WHO’s leadership role in conflict related humanitarian crises including Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, Gaza, the Sudan, Somalia, the Syrian Arab Republic and Ukraine. The IOAC is concerned over increasing demands in humanitarian crises and recommends further leveraging partners on the ground.

3. Safety of health personnel and WHO staff security in volatile settings remains a critical issue. The IOAC noted 1486 attacks on health care facilities were recorded across 19 countries in 2023. The occupied Palestinian territory reported alone 620 deaths and 964 injuries among health workers. The IOAC urges all parties to respect international humanitarian law and provide humanitarian access so health care workers can continue providing lifesaving care. The WHO secretariat must operationalize emergency SOPs for staff protection and provide adequate security training to all staff working in high-risk zones.

4. During the first quarter of 2024, the IOAC visited the WHO Regional Office for Europe to review the WHO response to the Ukraine emergency and conducted a field mission in Romania as it is one of the host countries for Ukrainian refugees. I would like to thank the Regional Director and the government of Romania for facilitating the IOAC work. Since November 2023, the Regional Office for Europe has played a core role in supporting the Ukraine crisis by leveraging comparative advantages arising from the political insight and its relations with the countries in the region. This has contributed also to lessening the burden on headquarters, which is already dealing with multiple other Grade 3 emergencies. The IOAC welcomes the updated Emergency Response Framework (ERF2.1) and commends its sound application as shown in the case of the Ukraine crisis management.

5. The IOAC has observed positive progress also in areas of PRSEAH, resource mobilization for emergency appeals, communications, and procurement. However, persistent challenges remain in implementing emergency SOPs, risk-averse HR policy for short-term contracts, and internal coordination among the different hubs established by HQ and the regional offices.

6. The Committee remains deeply concerned about a chronic shortage of flexible and sustainable financing in the WHE Programme and WHO’s work on health emergencies. The IOAC welcomes the Executive Board’s decision to approve the full plan for the investment round and will continue to follow this matter with great interest, particularly the impact it will have on the WHE Programme.

7. The IOAC congratulates member states for the progress made so far, and their willingness to finalise IHR amendments during this World Health Assembly and their commitment to reach
an agreement on a pandemic accord the soonest possible, based on the principles of equity and solidarity. IOAC reaffirms that equity and solidarity are not only moral principles but also prerequisites for preventing and effectively responding to pandemics. We believe that Member States should be capable of assessing implementation progress and therefore urges Member States to install a transparent reporting and monitoring systems to guide policies and orient financing of targeted programs to fill identified gaps.

8. Unless countries enhance their own capacities for emergency preparedness, prevention, and response, the WHE programme will be unable to respond to increasing numbers of threats and emergencies at its present level. The IOAC emphasizes that Member States have obligations to develop core public health capacities and the Secretariat must help Member States strengthen national capacities to prepare for, and be resilient to, health emergencies.

9. In closing, the IOAC commends the Director-General, the Regional Directors, the Executive Director of the WHE Programme, and staff across the Programme globally for their efforts in advancing WHO’s work in health emergencies during a turbulent year and in increasingly insecure settings. Our committee reaffirms its commitment to continue providing independent oversight and monitoring of WHO’s work in emergencies.

On behalf of the IOAC – I thank you.

Note from the Secretariat
The IOAC statement was delivered on Thursday, 30 May 2024 by Professor Walid Ammar, Chair of the Independent Oversight and Advisory Committee for the WHO Health Emergencies Programme.