Statement by Mr. Brendan O’Hearn, Deputy Director, Procedures and Facilitation, World Customs Organization (WCO)

Under agenda item 8.5 Strengthening public health emergency preparedness and response in the South-East Asia Region

I would like to thank the Regional Office for South-East Asia of the World Health Organization for inviting the World Customs Organization to the 74th Session of the WHO Regional Committee for South-East Asia.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the WCO has been working tirelessly to support its 183 Member Customs administrations in performing the key role they have in this and in similar crises.

This role is to 1) facilitate the cross-border movement of relief and essential supplies, including medicines, vaccines and their ingredients, medical supplies and equipment, 2) protect society from the distribution of counterfeit, substandard and/or illicit pharmaceutical products and other goods posing a threat to health and safety, and 3) sustain the supply chain continuity.

We have been supporting our Members by providing guidance on measures to be implemented at the border; organizing global enforcement operations; enhancing the cooperation at global and regional levels with other international organizations and private sector associations; and providing capacity building support to our Members to implement the relevant international standards and recommendations in the Customs domain.

The WHO has been a key partner to the WCO in these efforts.

Together with the WHO, we developed a number of lists of medicines, vaccines, medical supplies and medical substances. These lists included information on the classification of the items as per the Harmonized System, which is the universal “language” for classifying goods in international trade. The lists were extensively used by Customs administrations across the globe to identify, prioritize and facilitate the Customs clearance of items on the lists. They also helped economic operators involved in their distribution in avoiding misclassification and hence, delays and costs at the border.

The WHO also contributed to the organization of the WCO enforcement operation codenamed STOP 2 that is targeting counterfeit, substandard and/or illicit vaccines, pharmaceutical products and other goods linked to COVID-19.

At the national level health authorities and Customs administrations are partnering in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also in response to various other epidemic disease outbreaks and disaster situations.

During the current pandemic, world leaders have been calling for a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to the response to the crisis. This is also what the WCO has been advocating for. We have been highlighting the utmost importance of implementing the concept of Coordinated Border Management in the preparedness and initial response phases of any disaster.
We stand ready to continue our cooperation with the WHO for a better preparedness and resilience for any future health crisis.

We would be happy to contribute and further explicate the role of Customs in health emergencies in the future discussions regarding a new international treaty on pandemics that would support international efforts to reinforce global health security, in particular on preparedness and response to health emergencies, in light of the lessons learnt from the current pandemic.