Agenda 8.6 : Achieving UHC, SDGs and health security through stronger and more comprehensive PHC

- Good morning!
  - Excellencies in the Ministries of Health, Southeast Asian countries
  - Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director General, World Health Organization,
  - Dr. Poonam Khetrapal Singh, Regional Director, WHO SEARO
  - Representatives from the United Nations, international non-governmental organizations, civil society and academia.

- Thank you for inviting UNICEF to the WHO Regional Committee meeting.

- Today’s meeting celebrates our unprecedented global collaboration and investment in our fight against COVID-19 as we optimistically advance forward together towards “building forward better” our health and social service systems to benefit every child in South Asia.

- In the past two decades, South Asia has made landmark advancements in child survival. Together with governments and partners, we have reduced maternal mortality rate by 59% - from 395 to 163 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births.

- At the same time, neonatal mortality has also been cut by 59% as compared to 1990. South Asia now has the highest reduction in neonatal mortality in comparison to other regions.

- Our collective efforts bolstered routine immunization for DPT3 among children by 27%. This is an increase from 64% in 2000 to 91% in 2019.

- Despite these remarkable gains, South Asia remains off track in achieving the United Nations SDG 2030 targets for mothers and children:
  - The region has recorded 838,000 deaths among newborns.
  - More than 50,000 maternal deaths and 615,000 stillbirths continue to be registered yearly in our region.
  - Every year an estimated 6 - 8 million mother-and-newborn pairs face the hazards of birth without a skilled birth attendant.

- The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the situation for women and children in South Asia. Disruptions to regular health and immunization services due to drastic public health measures and budget cuts have hindered access to and utilization of essential maternal and child health services for the most vulnerable mothers and children living in remote, rural communities.

- The recently released 2021 WHO - UNICEF Estimated Immunization Coverage report highlights the worst continued decline in routine immunization coverage in 30 years.

- Honourable Ministers, South Asia has the second-highest number of children who have not received any routine vaccines. The number of “zero dose” children in the region has increased from 2 million in 2019 to 4 million in 2021, accounting for 1 in 5 (21%) of the global total. The majority of these children without the protection of routine vaccinations
live in urban slums and among the tribal and migrant populations – the same children who were already most likely to have been denied access to essential health and community services.

- Historically, robust primary health-care systems were pivotal to the advancements we made together in improving the health and wellbeing of every child and woman in South Asia over the past two decades. We need to prioritise and continue investing in strengthening and revitalizing primary healthcare systems to cement decades of progress that has kept children healthy and thriving.

- Honourable Ministers, we ask for your leadership and support in accelerating the primary health care agenda in our region. The path to building strong and resilient health and community systems is still a distant dream. However, our renewed commitment and investments can make a difference for the future. This should include institutionalizing community health as an integral part of the overall efforts to revitalize primary health care.

- The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the role of community health workers as the bridge between health systems and communities. They are often the first point of contact to health services for the most vulnerable people, and act as a vital social support system for mothers and children, especially where government services and structures are limited.

- Honourable Ministers, I call upon your leadership to ensure that community health workers are adequately trained, equipped, motivated, and supported, and are fully integrated in the primary health-care system. This includes adequate selection criteria, training and supportive supervision, access to adequate medicines and supplies, integration of data in the national Health Management Information system, career scale, accreditation and context-specific incentive packages, taking into consideration gender-responsive transformative approaches.

- In 2019, as part of the Global Monitoring Report, WHO recommended that countries must invest 1% more of their GDP on primary health care to eliminate glaring coverage gaps. Now, as a next step, we need to review the persistent resource gaps and prioritize invest in strengthening primary health-care systems.

- I congratulate WHO for finalizing the South-East Asia Regional Strategy for Primary Health Care: 2022-2030 with 12 clear Strategic Actions. We re-affirm our support for joint initiatives for Member States and partners to share experiences and synergize support towards strengthening primary health care in South Asia.

- I look forward to further deliberations during this week and ensure the highest commitment from UNICEF to support member states and WHO in this endeavour.

- Together, we can build a better, healthier, and more prosperous future for every child in South Asia.

- Thank you!