Statement on Provisional Agenda Item 8.2

Strengthening health emergency preparedness and response in the SE Asia Region building upon lessons learnt from COVID-19

75th Session of the World Health Organization RCM for the SEARO Region

Honourable Chair, distinguished delegates,

The World Heart Federation, supported by South East Asia Regional NCD Alliance, Healthy India Alliance and NCD Alliance, thank you for this opportunity to address the Regional Committee on one of the most critical subjects of our time.

The COVID-19 pandemic toll of lives lost and the impact on physical health and mental wellbeing is vast. The past two years have also highlighted the weak links in level of preparedness and response readiness to effectively address a health emergency of this stature. These weaknesses further drive health inequities in pandemic response across the globe. The third round of WHO's pulse survey (November-December 2021) showcased a continued disruption of essential services for non communicable diseases (NCDs) (e.g., cancer screening and treatment) and mental health care services across all member states.

There is strong evidence of the interplay of NCDs and infectious pandemics including COVID-19 and H1N1. Not only are people living with NCDs such as diabetes, hypertension, respiratory disease and obesity at increased risk of developing COVID-19, they also have an increased risk of developing severe COVID-19 symptoms. In addition, access to essential medical services required by those living with NCDs are too often derailed during times when health systems are overwhelmed as evidenced by WHO’s pulse surveys detailed above.

We therefore implore you to urgently recognize and address this dual burden face by those living with NCDs, including circulatory diseases, during health emergencies such as COVID-19. We call on Southeast Asia Member States to:

- Enhance community engagement through multi-sectoral approaches by meaningfully involving people living with NCDs, including those living with circulatory conditions, in the development and implementation of national COVID-19 or general emergency response and recovery plans;
- Develop vaccination policies which prioritize at risk populations, including people living with NCDs;
- Increase financing towards a sustainable response towards CVD and other NCDs through funding mechanisms such as taxation of unhealthy commodities; and
- Integrate monitoring and data collection on NCD prevalence, comorbidities, and risk factors into measures of pandemic readiness, resilience, and response.

We thank you for your attention and remain dedicated to supporting Member States in these vital endeavours, so that together we may prepare for, and with perseverance, prevent the next global health emergency.