WHO: with COVID-19 cases in Iraq at an alarming level, effective ways to prevent community-wide transmission is to avoid mass gatherings, exercise social distancing and wear masks in public

Baghdad, 16 August 2020 - Although the number of infected COVID-19 cases in Iraq is exponentially rising to an alarming and worrying level, suggesting a major health crisis soon, Iraqis can still defeat the pandemic if they continue to diligently apply preventive measures, from collective efforts such as avoiding mass gatherings to self-discipline acts of wearing masks in public, exercising social distancing as effective ways to block the dangerous community-wide transmissions.

The current proliferation of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country has challenged a fragile health system weakened by years of conflict. Despite the limitations, the swift and effective response to the pandemic by the health authorities, especially in the first few months of its spread in Iraq, was commendable. But in recent months, the situation deteriorated due to a number of factors, including the easing of the restrictions and the failure to adhere to the measures or to implement them forcefully.

The seriousness of the crisis can be clearly demonstrated through a simple epidemiological analysis of the recorded daily numbers over the last 175 days of the spread of the virus. Based on available data from the Ministry of Health and Environment in Iraq, by 16 August 2020 there were over 175,000 cases reported in the country, with over 5,800 related deaths. Data clearly indicates that more than 98 percent of the cases and deaths were reported during just the last three months. Almost 44,000 of cases are active in Iraq and close to 90 percent are treated at home, with nearly 9,000 of them health care workers. A detailed analysis of the pattern of spread of the virus in the country reveals that many parts of Iraq are now considered to be suffering
from community-wide transmission of the virus: an alarming and dangerous situation that requires urgent and serious measures.

A thorough analysis of the situation of the COVID-19 crisis in the country by the technical teams of several UN agencies (including WHO and UNICEF) highlights that Iraq needs to adjust its COVID-19 preparedness, readiness and response actions for the purpose of slowing the virus transmission, reducing number of daily reported cases, and ending at all costs the community outbreak. In the absence of a drug or vaccine, Iraq is only left with preventive measures to fight the spread of the pandemic. These include wearing masks and social distancing, instructions the health authorities keep stressing over and over and which many people are already following.

One of the most important measures to prevent widespread transmission of the virus is for mass gatherings (for example, weddings or funeral ceremonies, sports and cultural events) not to take place at this critical stage and for people to avoid such events for their own health and safety and that of their loved ones and community. These gatherings in large numbers put the risk of people unintentionally infecting others and spreading the virus very high. WHO and other UN bodies have undertaken a risk assessment of mass events in Iraq, looking into the likelihood of disease importation and spread in the country and its onward transmission, as well as the country’s capacity to manage and control the outbreak. It was concluded that public health risks increase significantly at events with close human contact in crowded venues. WHO judges that avoidance of mass gatherings and wearing masks (while keeping social distancing and adopting a practice of frequent handwashing) can greatly reduce the rate of transmission of COVID-19 by at least 57 percent and 30 percent respectively.

The United Nations family in Iraq appreciates and strongly supports recent statements by Iraqi political and religious scholars discouraging super transmission events in the coming days. If we are to ensure the protection of people from the disease and prevent super transmissions, mass assemblies of people should not take place at this stage. The United Nations, guided by
WHO expertise, stands committed to support the government in planning and implementing preventive measures in line with the recommendations of the health authorities.

The experience of other countries shows that it is possible to contain COVID-19 and gradually reopen economies within 2-3 months, if countries heed the advice of competent medical experts. With self-discipline, a willingness to remain informed by credible sources, and the concerted efforts of all, Iraq will overcome the pandemic.

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