

MAHA BARAKAT

Director General of the Frontline Heroes Office and Senior Advisor at Mubadala

Thank you very much and thank you for inviting me to participate in this panel today. Following on the talks that we have heard, the WHO Eastern Mediterranean region consists of 21 member states and one territory. Within the EMRO region there were 23 million cases of Covid during the pandemic with 348 000 reported deaths. We believe that this is an underestimate. There are certain countries that were not fully at capacity in terms of their ability to test, diagnose and manage the cases, so we suspect the numbers are greater in the Eastern Mediterranean region.

If you would allow me to go into the UAE as a specific example, then we can explain how there were initiatives within the UAE that helped other regions and countries in EMRO. Within the United Arab Emirates, where you are today, the population is approximately 10 million people and in the last almost three years, we have had 1 million cases of Covid diagnosed by PCR, of whom, unfortunately 2 348 passed away. That gives us an average case fatality ratio of around 0.2%.

The way that the country dealt with the pandemic, the UAE's response, had several pillars but I will concentrate on some of the most important and I would say the most important was wise leadership at the highest level. The governance at the highest level was able to coordinate the national response, so the whole government and society response was coordinated in a seamless manner. All too often we see cases where resources may be available, but something goes wrong with the governance or the leadership and you do not get the optimum outcome, so I think leadership is extremely important. Other pillars for the response were obviously the infection prevention and control program nationally, which was comprehensive, robust and protected the most vulnerable and frontline workers. The third pillar is laboratory testing because if you cannot diagnose it accurately and quickly, you lose the ability to fight Covid. When you can diagnose it urgently within 24 hours you can implement your isolation and preventive measures much more effectively. The UAE actually conducted 200 million PCR tests over the last three years and that is 20 times the size of the population, so on average, an individual would have had over 20 tests. Then comes vaccination and no country could have protected itself against hospitalization and mortality without an effective vaccination program. The UAE started clinical trials on vaccination as early as summer 2020, by September there was emergency use of vaccination and by June 2022, the United Arab Emirates had achieved 100% vaccination of its target groups. I think this is a key component of a country's ability to reduce hospitalizations and death. Furthermore, last year construction started on a local vaccine manufacturing plant that will produce 200 million doses of vaccines,



and these will support not just the UAE, but the EMRO region, Africa and other countries in need.

In the interests of time, I will just concentrate on one more pillar, which is urgent and critical resource mobilization. This is both in terms of prioritizing domestic budget towards Covid, getting equipment mobilized and supplied to hospitals where needed, and of course human resources and how you mobilize teams in emergencies with very short notice.

The question is: who are the people who make up the frontline? The UAE is unique in that His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed launched the Frontline Heroes Office in June 2020, dedicated to looking after all frontline workers in the country, to champion them, listen to their needs and support them. The Office set up a frontline worker registry, which now has 135 000 individuals. For each frontline worker we know their individual circumstances and personal needs. The Office has supported them with education for themselves and for their children, with physical and mental health support. It has worked with the central bank to try to ease the stress of repaying loans, and for those who are expatriates, they have been given golden visas to help retain and support them in the country. For the category of frontline workers who have sacrificed the most, those who have died, we call them the fallen heroes, the Office has adopted their children and spouses. We look after them, make sure that their schooling, healthcare and housing are covered, so we do not forget those who have sacrificed the most.

My final point is that it is not enough to look just within your own country. The United Arab Emirates was one of the first to help internationally and in the course of the pandemic over 2 000 tons of medical aid has been distributed to 135 countries.

In summary, Mr. Chairman, if you asked me what the most important element was of the UAE's response, I would say wise leadership. You need wise leadership to coordinate a national response and to help with urgent and critical resource mobilization.

Michel Kazatchkine, Special Advisor to the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, Senior Fellow at the Global Health Centre of the Graduate Institute for International and Development Studies in Geneva

Thank you very much. Thank you for that focus on frontline healthcare workers. I am not sure I am not aware of any other country that has set up a special office dedicated to healthcare workers, basically reporting to the highest level of government.