

# MAHA BARAKAT

Assistant Minister for Health and Life Sciences at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the UAE

## **Michel Kazatchkine, Special Advisor to the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe**

The question is not whether we will have another pandemic in the future, but when. One of the factors that may well push us towards an imminent new pandemic is the impact of climate on health. I am really grateful to Honorable Minister Barakat for being with us today and talking to us about climate and health ahead of the COP28 that will be held here in the UAE.

Minister, thank you very much.

## **Maha Barakat**

Thank you very much. Good morning, everybody.

One of our senior colleagues in the global health world, Peter Piot, was one of the first to say, 'You cannot consider pandemic preparedness without taking into consideration climate', and how true that is. If you allow me, I will just share with you some slides to highlight the connection between climate and health.

The WHO has stated that climate is the biggest challenge to health of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and, if you look at a recent report of the IPCC, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, they say that, under a high-emission scenario, we would expect nine million deaths every year by the end of the century, just on climate reasons alone. If countries implement the Paris Agreement by the year 2050, we could be saving one million lives every year, just from pollution alone.

Of course, there is a financial toll, in that, by the end of this decade, by the year 2030, we are looking at a cost of climate impact on health of between USD 2 billion to USD 4 billion every year.

Therefore, climate does a lot of things that impact human health and you will have seen the tragic news of flooding, heatwaves, of course zoonosis, which means the jump of a disease from an animal to humans, and that is what triggered the Covid 19 pandemic, vector-borne diseases. Vectors are essentially organisms that carry other organisms that cause disease in humans, for instance, mosquitos. I will talk more on mosquitos in a minute.

There are other things that affect what we call non-communicable disease, like mental health. Therefore, climate change has a real impact on human health and we need to take this very seriously.

I am just going to talk a little on mosquitos. Forgive me, this is not a nice topic, but just to tell you, there are many mosquitos in the world, but these are three of the nastiest on the screen. The one on the left, Anopheles, carries malaria. The one in the middle, Aedes, carries dengue and the one on the right, Culex, carries West Nile fever. These are all nasty diseases and, in many scenarios, especially with children, will cause death.

The WHO has stated that climate change is causing a surge in mosquito-related illnesses, particularly malaria and dengue. We believe it is related to warmer temperatures, redistribution of water and human activity. Therefore, many things related to climate are causing a surge on these illnesses.

This is the burden of malaria. We are talking about children under the age of five dying from cerebral malaria. It is entirely preventable, and this tragic scenario happens over and over again. We are talking about, of the 619,000 deaths from malaria in the year 2021, about 80% were children under the age of five. That is half a million children every year and that is expected to rise. These children are dying from an entirely preventable disease.

To add to this, another of the mosquitos, which is called Anopheles Stephensi, having been largely confined to South Asia, is now entering Africa because of warmer temperatures and other things. This Stephensi carries malaria and the problem is it actually likes to bite during the daytime. A big mainstay of managing malaria in the sub-Saharan region has been giving children bed nets that are covered in insecticides.

The problem with this mosquito is that it bites during the day and, if it bites during the daytime, the bed nets are mostly ineffective. There is no point protecting them at night when the biting is also happening in the daytime.

The other worrying thing about this mosquito is that it seems to be resistant to most of the insecticides, particularly the ones used in indoor room sprays. This is of concern.

Anopheles has a cousin, who is called Aedes. This mosquito carries dengue and climate change has accelerated the invasion of this mosquito into other climates that are not prepared for it. It carries dengue, and dengue has now spread to many countries. The WHO has said that it is actually present in every WHO region and will soon be endemic in the United States and many countries in Europe.

The number of people that are predisposed to it are almost half the numbers of people in the world. The number of people who have been modelled to have caught it last year was 390 million, of whom just under 100 million were symptomatic and the number of deaths is in the thousands. This is what we are talking about when we are worried about climate change.

Moving on to other non-vector issues, like air pollution, we know that over 90% of people breathe unhealthy levels of air. A senior surgeon in north India, in New Delhi, is well-known to speak about these topics. He has said that, whereas in the 80s, 90% of his patients with lung cancer were smokers, he is saying that, now, half of them are non-smokers. Of those, a fifth are actually under the age of 50.

Therefore, we really need to take stock of this and start acting. This is where COP28 comes in. For the first time, a COP is hosting a dedicated day for health issues brought on by climate

change, and that day will be on December 3 whilst COP is being hosted here in the United Arab Emirates in Dubai.

On that day, what we hope will happen is that it will be a watershed moment for climate and health, where we will raise the issues of the seriousness of climate on health issues, lobby support and hopefully raise the issue of health on the political agenda.

There will be the first ever ministerial on climate and health. We will be discussing public health issues and how to build health systems that are strong enough to deal with the climate changes. Also, we will address how to do this in a low-carbon way. There is no point building hospitals that will generate more carbon. We are talking about looking at ways of doing it in a low-carbon method.

Of course, climate change disproportionately affects the most vulnerable in the world: women, children, ethnic minorities, poor communities, migrants or displaced people, other populations, and those with underlying health conditions. We have to address how to help developing countries deal with this problem.

This is what health system strengthening looks like. We will not go through all the topics, but it is a holistic approach. You cannot just take one element and say, 'This is what a strong health system will look like'. You need all the elements, and I will always emphasize leadership and governance. Number one is a very important component of a country's response to threats. Of course, the last one is financing. You cannot do any of this without dedicated financing for dealing with the adaptation.

On Health Day in COP28, we are hoping to proceed with endorsement for our Declaration on Climate and Health. This declaration was announced during the World Health Summit in Berlin on October 17 this year and we are hoping that, before the start of COP, we will have many countries endorse it.

The declaration, essentially, is split into three parts. It talks about the importance of adaptation to deal with climate health issues. It talks about increasing financing because it is not a matter of taking more money from the climate budget. This needs to find its own source of funding. Then it also talks about the importance of mainstreaming health in all the climate agendas.

On my last note, what is the legacy of COP28 when it comes to health? At the end of the day, it is trying to save as many lives as we can by urgent catalytic action and including novel mechanisms for looking at response.

In summary, COP28 will be a call for action for the first time for climate and health issues. Thank you.

**Michel Kazatchkine**

Thank you very much, Honorable Minister, and congratulations for this initiative on bringing health into the COP28, a major challenge for the future and pandemic preparedness.