

# **GROUP OF FRIENDS OF UNIVERSAL HEALTH COVERAGE AND GLOBAL HEALTH BRIEFING ON COVID-19 AND UNIVERSAL HEALTH COVERAGE**

15 May 2020

*- As delivered -*

## **Statement by H.E. Tijjani Muhammad Bande, President of the 74th Session of the United Nations General Assembly**

Distinguished Co-Chairs of the Group of Friends on Universal Health Coverage and Global Health

Executive Director of UNICEF

Deputy Director-General of WHO

Assistant Director-General of WHO

Excellencies;

I thank the distinguished Co-Chairs of the Group of Friends on Universal Health Coverage and Global Health for convening today's discussion on the global health pandemic, which is impacting the lives of everyone, everywhere.

I extend my deepest sympathies to those who have lost loved ones as a result of COVID-19. To those who are battling the virus, know that you are in our thoughts and we wish you a swift recovery. We are all grateful to the healthcare professionals and frontline workers who are working tirelessly to protect our world and those we hold dearest.

Excellencies,

It was around this time last year that delegations negotiated the landmark political declaration on universal health coverage, thereafter, adopted at the beginning of the 74<sup>th</sup> Session of the General Assembly. None of us could have imagined that within the year we would all understand on an existential level, the necessity for the Declaration.

Your foresight has prepared the international community to respond rapidly to this global challenge as Member States committed, at the highest level, to scale up both national and international efforts to build a healthier world for all.

“A global challenge requires a multilateral response”, we have heard this throughout the past few months. The United Nations is indeed best placed to spearhead a response to this challenge.

Since the beginning of this pandemic, the World Health Organisation has provided the world with reliable information and guidance to the global community. The message has been clear enough: we must not only defeat the spread of the virus, but also mitigate the social and economic impact of this catastrophe.

The United Nations family, from our ‘blue helmet’ peacekeepers, to the Resident Coordinators and their teams in our reformed development system, have been mobilised to respond to safeguard the people we serve. The Secretary-General’s call for a global ceasefire and the Global Humanitarian Response Plan have underpinned these actions.

Furthermore, the General Assembly, as the main deliberative body of the United Nations, has prioritised business continuity whilst ensuring the safety of all delegations and staff. It has provided a forum for Member States to share best practices and to put forth initiatives with the aim of defeating COVID-19 and mitigating its socio-economic impacts. The Assembly has worked consistently and cooperatively to formulate both short and medium-term responses to ensure that the multifaceted aspects of the crisis are not overlooked. It is as important a work as ever.

Conflict prevention, poverty eradication and zero hunger, quality education, climate action and inclusion have been key priorities of the 74<sup>th</sup> session of the General Assembly and must be incorporated into our response to COVID-19.

When we speak of education, not only are the long-term effects of a disruption in education detrimental to a child's cognitive and social development, but school closures have resulted in a disruption of vaccines and more than 370 million children around the world losing out on their main source of nutrition. In relation to this, I commend UNICEF for its timely action to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on children.

This is just one example of the layered problems presented by the pandemic. We know that people suffering from hunger are at greater risk of developing severe COVID-19 symptoms as a result of associated health conditions, such as malnutrition and non-communicable diseases, which are part of the immune system.

Compounding this is the fact that those who are hungry are often trapped in poverty or fragile contexts. There are communities which do not have access to health services, water and sanitation facilities, or indeed the space to quarantine or practice social distancing.

This threatens not just the health of the people in these communities, but the health of humanity. The COVID-19 pandemic should reinforce the importance of universal health coverage to policy makers. The measure of our resilience is that of the most vulnerable in our society.

Excellencies,

As health systems and service providers are placed under enormous pressure, we are witnessing a redirection of resources which results in reduced access to and availability of resources for health services. We cannot allow this to happen.

We must learn from past experience. The Ebola outbreak in West Africa led to a disruption in vaccinations and maternal health services. Indeed from 2013-2016, the period of the Ebola outbreak, more women died in Sierra Leone as a result of obstetric complications than they did of Ebola itself.

UHC will stabilise health care and associated costs which have pushed 100 million people into poverty. It will secure supply chains which are essential for the provision of food, medicines and medical supplies to keep our populations healthy.

We pledged in 2015 to leave no one behind. We cannot revoke or relent on that promise at a time of crisis when existing inequalities are deepening. Through the provision of Universal Health Coverage, we must take an inclusive systems-based approach to global health which advances not just SDG 3 but all of our Goals.

To this end, I call on Member States to follow through on their commitments made under the Addis Ababa Action Agenda for Financing for Development and the UHC political declaration. We must not allow the Decade of Action and Delivery to implement the SDGs to pass us by.

Excellencies,

Combating COVID-19 is a collective responsibility. We will be defined by our actions – both individual and collective. We must lead by example. We must stay at home, abide by social distancing recommendations, wash our hands, and look out for one another.

We must galvanise multilateral action to implement universal health coverage. This is the first step in building back better.

The founders of the United Nations came together in recognition of the fact that solidarity was humanity's first, and best, line of defence when contending with global challenges. The world is watching. We must rise to this challenge as *nations, united*.

Although we are not sitting together, rest assured that we are in this *together*. My office stands ready to support you as we strive together to build a healthier world for the people we serve.

I thank you.