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**Statement by
MR. SHA ZUKANG
UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS
TO THE ECOSOC ANNUAL MINISTERIAL REVIEW
REGIONAL MINISTERIAL MEETING FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC
ON “PROMOTING HEALTH LITERACY”
Beijing, 29 April 2009**

Honourable Ministers, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to join Ambassador Lucas in congratulating the Government of China for hosting this Regional Preparatory Meeting for the ECOSOC Annual Ministerial Review (AMR), as well as for volunteering to make a National Presentation at the 2009 Review in July.

I feel honoured to have the opportunity to address this important meeting. I feel especially privileged, as a Chinese citizen, to note the energetic engagement of my country with the United Nations and its Economic and Social Council on issues of global public health. This is an area where China has historically taken major initiatives and made significant advances for the health of its people.

We meet as the world confronts its most severe financial crisis and economic downturn since the Great Depression of 1929. At the same time, we are embarked on a global venture to eradicate poverty, combat disease and improve the health and well being of millions of people.

We also meet at a time when the swine flu outbreak is at the centre of global attention and concern. Multiple crises are superimposed on one another. Each crisis impacts on the others, making recovery more complicated and difficult. The current outbreak, apart from its direct human costs will impact on the financial markets, trade, travel and could overwhelm health systems of poor countries. It raises questions of response and preparedness. Nations with high health literacy will find it easier to respond. An educated and aware citizenry will be better able to listen, absorb and implement the basic preventive and care messages relating to the crisis. Once again it points to the timeliness of ECOSOC discussions on public health and the specific relevance of our meeting today.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since the 2000 Millennium Summit, countries have made great strides towards the achievement of this ambitious global development agenda. Now, the current crisis has shaken the foundations of the international financial and economic system. It is putting much of the hard-earned progress in developing countries at risk and may jeopardize future advancement.

The United Nations Secretary-General has warned that, in the midst of the economic crisis, we must safeguard investments in global health, particularly to protect the most vulnerable people. Indeed, he has made promoting global public health one of his top priorities, precisely

because health is a foundation for prosperity, stability, poverty reduction and human development.

We must not waver. We must live up to our commitments. At the same time, we also need to learn to do more with less and to strengthen and grow our partnerships. This is why today's discussion on "Promoting health literacy" – a powerful and cost-effective tool for accelerating health progress – is so timely and important.

As our focus is on Asia and the Pacific, let me first say a few words about the region's progress in public health, particularly towards achieving the three health-related Millennium Development Goals: to reduce maternal mortality by three quarters, to reduce under-five child mortality by two thirds, and to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, all by 2015.

The region has made significant progress in reducing the rates of infant mortality and under-five mortality during the last decade. Yet, it is worrying that the pace of child mortality reduction is slowing, particularly in South and South-West Asia, which have the region's highest mortality rates.

Tragically, of all the MDGs, the least progress has been made so far in reducing maternal mortality, in Asia and the Pacific and around the world. Worldwide, half a million women still die every year as a result of complications from pregnancy and childbirth. Half of these deaths occur in this region.

The region is off track in combating HIV/AIDS. Prevalence of the disease is still rising, with the highest levels in the Pacific countries and in South and South-West Asia. Malaria remains entrenched in many rural areas, despite the success of prevention programmes in reducing the incidence of malaria, in many cases drastically. And the region bears the largest share of the global burden of tuberculosis in absolute numbers.

The region is also seeing a rise in the prevalence of non-communicable diseases, such as cancers, cardiovascular diseases and chronic illnesses. Indeed, the death rates from these diseases are now higher than those from communicable diseases. And the region has the second highest rate of unintentional child injuries.

Of course, there are big differences within and among countries in the region. Asia and the Pacific is remarkably diverse, with 53 countries from Kiribati in the South-Pacific to Tajikistan in Central Asia. This diversity is reflected in the array of challenges the region is facing, in development and particularly in the area of public health. Within countries, the situation in rural areas is often more worrisome than in the cities, where usually more hospitals and doctors are available.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The concept of health literacy is not always well understood. I have with me a book in Chinese, with a foreword signed by the Chinese Minister of Health, called "66 articles on health literacy". I read this wonderful book. I wish it was available in all UN languages. It shows the significant impact that easy to understand concepts can make on improving public health. Health

literacy is linked to education. It is an outcome which allows the public to change their lifestyles and conditions through awareness.

“Health Literacy” is defined as the “ability of an individual to gain access to, understand, and use health information for promoting and maintaining health”. By helping people to navigate the health system, to engage in self-care and to participate in community action for health, improved health literacy can lead to health gains.

For instance, the negative impacts of obesity on health can be more effectively addressed if the people in the community are better informed, including on what the benefits are for communities of acting collectively to create an environment that is conducive to healthy eating and physical activity. Increased knowledge is bound to create healthier societies with less burden on the health systems and less expenditure on curative measures. The age-old adage of “Prevention is better than cure” captures the essence of what health literacy stands for.

Addressing unhealthy eating and tobacco use are two areas which provide the highest return on investment and where health literacy can have a significant impact. Greater health literacy can also contribute to improving maternal and child health, under-nutrition, or HIV/Aids infections.

The task of improving health literacy clearly cannot be tackled by the health sector alone. Empowering people to acquire and understand health information and prepare them to take adequate measures is a process, in which members of the education sector, the media, ICT and the business sector, among others, also need to be involved.

Health literacy is relatively low worldwide, both in developed and developing countries. In fact, it appears that regardless of the country’s level of development, the level of health literacy is low worldwide. For instance in Australia, 60 per cent of the population has scored below a level regarded as optimal for health maintenance.

The development of a regional action plan to promote health literacy in the Asia and Pacific Region would be an important milestone. This meeting could call on the relevant actors, led by the World Health Organization, to consider initiating work on such a plan.

In the next two days, we are going to look at how collaboration among different sectors and different stakeholders can help improve health literacy levels. We will also share best practices and showcase initiatives that may be replicable in other countries. I am confident that our discussions will lead to effective recommendations on how to deploy health literacy to accelerate progress towards the achievement of the health-related goals and commitments.

We are lucky to have with us top-notch experts and policymakers and I am looking forward to two stimulating and productive days of discussions.

Thank you.