



**Statement by**

**MR. BADER OMAR ALDAFA**

UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL AND EXECUTIVE SECRETARY OF THE  
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA (ESCWA)

**ECOSOC ANNUAL MINISTERIAL REVIEW  
WESTERN ASIA REGIONAL MINISTERIAL MEETING  
ON ADDRESSING NONCOMMUNICABLE DISEASES AND INJURIES**

10 May 2009, Doha, Qatar

Excellencies,  
Distinguished delegates,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to join my colleagues from the United Nations in thanking the Government of Qatar for hosting this important regional Ministerial Meeting on Noncommunicable Diseases and Injuries.

This important event comes at a time when the world is facing a severe financial crisis which will adversely affect all aspects of economic and social development including public health.

Although the majority of ESCWA member countries are on track for meeting the Millennium Development Goals related to health, the global burden of disease is shifting. Communicable diseases, such as tuberculosis, remain a major concern especially in the least developed countries of the region. However, noncommunicable diseases, including cardiovascular disease and diabetes, are increasingly accounting for significant morbidity and mortality in the ESCWA region as in other parts of the world. Injuries, especially among youth and the working-age population, are leading to premature loss of life and disability, and in our region, road traffic deaths are among the highest in the world.

At the individual and family level, premature death and disability brings not only emotional pain and suffering, but can also push families below the poverty line. The sick and disabled often lose their jobs and livelihoods, and family spending on healthcare becomes the priority.

At the national and regional level, premature death, disability, and the burden on health systems undermine development efforts and impact economic growth.

We must act, and prevention is the key.

Over the next two days, regional and international experts gathered here will address the main risk factors for noncommunicable diseases and highlight new initiatives and national strategies to combat these diseases. They will address the tragic loss of life due to road accidents and other injuries, and propose interventions for prevention.

I hope that the discussions will also underscore the importance of social equity and social determinants of health and address the multi-dimensional aspects of promoting health. The poor and disadvantaged must have equal access to healthcare and be able to lead a healthy lifestyle with their families.

Today over half of the population in the ESCWA region lives in urban areas. Promoting healthy urban environments should become a regional priority. We must think about road safety. We must encourage physical activity, including sports, and ensure the availability of public recreational spaces. We must reduce occupational hazards and address the needs of migrant workers.

At the same time, we must not forget about the needs of the rural poor, including for access to clean water, sanitation, and adequate health services. The specific health challenges faced by countries in conflict and post-conflict situations are also a significant regional concern.

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

Adequate financing for health is imperative. Although healthcare spending has increased in the region, at the moment, several countries spend more than double the resources on national security than on health.

Health policies and national development strategies must be better integrated, to ensure that positive economic growth trends are translated into improvements in human capital and visible health gains for our people.

Promoting public health is not only the responsibility of Ministries of Health. Ministries of Planning, Finance, Transport, Education, Environment and Social Affairs are an integral part of the solution, as is civil society and the private sector. Health education should be integrated in our school programmes. Employers should protect the health of their employees.

Since disease respects no borders, regional cooperation is critical in combating pandemics, such as the swine flu, and in coordinating initiatives to address key regional health risks.

The challenge before us is great, and the economic crisis facing the world, will certainly impact public health. However, I am confident that this meeting will help formalize our commitment to address the issue of noncommunicable diseases and injuries and provide concrete solutions to regional health priorities.

Let us act together. Prevention is the key.

I wish you all success in this meeting, and thank you.