

“Health must be included in the international diplomatic format”

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Returning from Dhaka, where he attended a multilateral meeting organised by WHO for the 11 health ministers from the Southeast Asia region, Dr Harsh Vardhan said, "I have informally proposed that a regional meeting of foreign and health ministers under one roof be held as a first step, and WHO agreed in principle to build upon the idea and make it a reality. "No country, however rich and powerful, has the capability to marshal all the intellectual and physical resources that are necessary to fight the rising burden of communicable as well as non-communicable diseases. They want to reach out to give as well as receive cooperation. It is time to institutionalize this in the rubric of international diplomacy," said the health minister.

Given the scary global disease burden scenario, it is necessary to give health a permanent place in the format of international diplomacy. Countries need to both externalize and internalize health paradigms as, in the globalized world, there is no room for complacency.

He pointed out that this is the age of "regional strategies" and "global initiatives". For instance, the just-concluded Dhaka meet saw the adoption of a resolution titled "Regional strategy for strengthening the role of the health sector in civil registration and vital statistics". A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on traditional medicine was signed between India and Bangladesh and an existing MoU on cooperation against kala-azar involving India, Bangladesh, and Nepal was expanded to include Thailand and Bhutan.

"No country is an island. Globalization does not only mean the conversion of the world into a common market. It also means the freedom to exchange ideas and collaborate for achieving a human development goal," Dr Harsh Vardhan added.

Dr Harsh Vardhan addressed the opening session of the regional conference and went on to have bilateral meetings with the

health ministers of Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Timor-Leste, and Indonesia. He also called on the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Ms Sheikh Hasina.

As a WHO Adviser-Consultant in the early 2000s, Dr Harsh Vardhan had visited most of the countries of the region to assist them in polio eradication. Today, the entire region has become polio free with not a single new case reported for over three years.

"I have made clear to my interlocutors that I want the best lessons from the world of public healthcare to flow through India's systems. They too appreciated that India too has a lot of success stories to share," Dr Harsh Vardhan said.

For example, Bangladesh's community clinics, its emphasis on making women the chief beneficiaries of progressive policies based on evidence of its multiplier effect, have combined to improve its overall health profile. Sri Lanka has drastically reduced its maternal and infant mortality rates. Maldives has practically eradicated malaria. Indonesia's success with health insurance holds out lessons for India which is in the process of introducing universal health insurance.

Dr Harsh Vardhan's conception of diplomacy goes beyond government-to-government handshakes. Involving the non-government sector is also on his agenda. That is why he held a meeting with Dr Zafarulla Chowdhury, head of Gonosasthya Kendra, and father of Bangladesh's National Drug Policy.

"Dr Chowdhury and I are believers in rational drug use and resolving the pressing problem of unavailability of human resources with innovative ideas. That is why I wish to get into idea exchange with this scholarly and experienced health activist," he said.

Similarly, Dr Harsh Vardhan had a meeting with Dr Saima Wazed Hossain, who received a WHO award this week for her fight against neural development disorder and autism.

"I agree with her idea of a global partnership against autism. Incidentally the WHO meet saw participants stress the need for a coordinated and comprehensive response to the challenge of Autism Spectrum Disorders in the Southeast Asia region. The government of Bangladesh has embraced many of her recommendations," he pointed out.

The health minister also had substantive talks with Dr Margaret Chan, director-general of WHO, and Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh, the regional director. Both the senior functionaries agreed to back India's focused initiatives on fighting measles, vaccine preventable diseases, and other non-communicable diseases.

The health ministers adopted the Dhaka Declaration on vector-borne diseases which calls for adoption of steps to control and eliminate malaria, lymphatic filariasis, and kala-azar. About 1.4 billion are vulnerable to malaria, 871 million to lymphatic filariasis and 147 million to kala-azar. Fifty two percent of the world's dengue-vulnerable people live in these 11 countries.