



### **Joint Press Release**

## **13 million Afghans at risk of contracting Leishmaniasis, says WHO**

**14 October 2010 | Kabul, Afghanistan** – The World Health Organization (WHO) today launched its first global report on neglected tropical diseases. In light of an ongoing Leishmaniasis outbreak in Herat, Afghanistan, WHO along with the Ministry of Public Health and the Afghan Red Crescent Society used this opportunity to raise awareness about and advocate for neglected diseases in Afghanistan, with special emphasis on Leishmaniasis, a disease that threatens the health of 13 million vulnerable Afghans, especially women and girls.

In Kabul, commonly considered as the world capital of [Cutaneous] Leishmaniasis, the number of new reported cases dramatically rose from the estimated yearly figure of 17,000 to 65,000 in 2009, mainly among women and girls.

"This number is likely to be the tip of the iceberg as cases are grossly underreported owing to poor diagnostic tools and the stigma that is attached to this disease," claimed Peter Graaff, WHO Representative to Afghanistan.

[Cutaneous] Leishmaniasis is a parasitic disease transmitted through the bite of certain species of sandfly. The major symptom is skin sores which erupt weeks to months after the person has been bitten.

Leishmaniasis is both preventable and curable. Preventable through bed nets, and curable through medical treatment.

"The high cost of treatment makes it difficult to integrate anti-Leishmaniasis drugs into the Basic Package of Health Services," said Her Excellency Dr Suraya Dalil, Acting Minister of Public Health. "I urge donors to take this cause seriously, as it causes unnecessary suffering amongst a large number of Afghans."

"Addressing stigma, early diagnosis and early treatment is the way to go about tackling this disease," said Fatima Gilani, Director of the Afghan Red Crescent Society. "Protecting people from Leishmaniasis is affording them the Right to Life with dignity."

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