



UN Volunteers serving with the World Health Organization's Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean in Cairo, Egypt.

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UN Volunteers support WHO in the Arab States: COVID-19

This year, World Health Day arrives as healthcare systems across the globe are facing the unprecedented challenge of COVID-19 outbreak. In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, where the pandemic continues to threaten vulnerable populations in countries with fragile health systems while putting strain on even those with stronger health systems, World Health Organization (WHO) says the window of opportunity is still there but slowly closing day by day.

Over the past two years, more and more UN Volunteers have been serving with WHO in support of its operations in the Arab States (from 8 in 2018 to 50 in 2020). Today, these UN Volunteers are part of the organization's efforts to support an effective COVID-19 response by governments of the region, serving in functions varying from technical support and public information, to general administration, financial and personnel management.

Based at the East Mediterranean Regional Office in Cairo, Mostafa Othman serves as a UNV Epidemiologist within the World Health Emergency Programme. Even prior to COVID-19, his tasks mainly focused on data collection and monitoring of healthcare emergencies – such as disease outbreaks, humanitarian crises, natural disasters, and other hazard emergencies – in the Region.

The outbreak resulted in a proliferation of incoming data in various forms. All of which need to be stored and utilized efficiently for evidence-based decision making. Currently, Mostafa is supporting the development of a regional registry for priority diseases, mainly COVID-19, by utilizing technology to automate processes that help take some burden off the working staff.

Heidi Ghanem is a UN Volunteer serving as a Technical Officer with the Detection Verification and Risk Assessment Team in the same programme. Just like Mostafa, Heidi's assignment was already relevant to the detection of acute public health events. Nowadays, she is supporting the enhancement of COVID-19 case detection and surveillance systems, in addition to contributing to real-time data collection and processing, and the production of daily briefings and weekly situation reports.

“It is only natural to feel stressed, afraid, and worried about yourself and your loved ones. On World Health Day, my wish for health workers is to stay calm, strong and healthy. You are the heroes of our times; the whole world is counting on you.” -- Heidi Ghanem, UN Volunteer with WHO EMRO.

In Jordan, Heba Safi is one of four UN Volunteers serving with WHO country office. While her tasks do not involve responding to health emergencies, Heba has been supporting the prevention of respiratory diseases in a different way. Her assignment as a Technical Officer mainly focuses on monitoring air pollutants levels, estimating health impact of long- and short-term exposure to ambient and household air pollution, and supporting countries in the East Mediterranean countries find solutions to reduce their pollution and improve air quality.

In the neighboring State of Palestine, UN Volunteers serving with WHO in the country have shifted their focus to COVID-19 response. Mokryeon Cho, who serves as a UNV Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist, is now concentrating on supporting the COVID-19 country response plan, by establishing key performance indicators (KPIs), monitoring and reporting to the regional office.

Likewise, Abdelrahman Jarour left much of the usual administrative work behind to support in the procurement of medical equipment and materials much needed to enhance preparedness for the outbreak in Gaza.

On the same front, UN Volunteers are supporting the massive outreach and awareness raising efforts WHO is leading in the region, as part of preventative measures against the pandemic.

Rokayya Konsowa has been volunteering with WHO Egypt country office as a Communication Officer. The outbreak changed Rokkaya's title a bit in practice, as she is currently "wearing the hat of risk/emergency communication officer," she says.

The work of Rokkaya and her colleague UN Volunteer communicators is crucial to keep the media updated, support delivering awareness messages to affected populations, general public and healthcare workers, as well as in addressing rumours and misconceptions spreading within communities. More UN Volunteers have joined WHO recently in similar functions, to support COVID-19 response in the region.

"I am keen offer my best in support of my community, my organization and my team in responding to COVID-19", says Leila Marwan, who has just joined WHO Tunisia country office as a Communications Specialist.



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