The World Tuberculosis Day is commemorated globally on 24 March every year to raise public awareness about the adverse health and socioeconomic impacts of Tuberculosis. The Day is an opportune occasion to garner support and collaboration at global, regional and national levels to step up efforts to end TB. The Day is also observed as the SAARC Tuberculosis Day across South Asia to combat the epidemic.

This year, the theme of the Day is “It’s time for action! It’s time to End TB”. The theme is very apt in that it is indeed time to scale up access to prevention and treatment of TB; it’s time to build accountability and ensure sufficient and sustainable financing for the global fight against the epidemic; and it’s time to end stigma and discrimination against people affected by it.

Despite being a preventable and curable disease, TB continues to remain the world’s deadliest infectious disease. Every day, approximately 30,000 people fall ill and more than 4000 people lose their lives due to TB. South Asia, home to 25% of the global population, has an estimated annual TB incidence of 3.7 million, which is equivalent to 206 cases in 100000 people, accounting for 37% of the global TB burden. Three out of eight Member States of SAARC are among the thirty highest TB and Multi Drug Resistant-TB burden countries of the world.

At the global level, efforts are underway to achieve the target of ending TB by 2030 as one of the Sustainable Development Goals. In the attainment of this universal goal, SAARC adopted a Regional Strategy for Elimination of Tuberculosis (2018-2023) with a target to eliminate TB in the region by 2027, even before the global timeline.

Established in 1994, the SAARC Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS Centre has been coordinating the efforts of the National TB Programmes in prevention, control and elimination of TB in the region. The recent initiatives of the Centre on cross-border and migration health on TB/HIV and up-gradation of its laboratory as the SAARC Supra-national Reference Laboratory for TB and HIV/AIDS, which will be operational in the near future, will be instrumental in achieving the regional target of ending TB by 2027.

On this World Tuberculosis Day, I wish to call upon the Member States to re-double their efforts to make the region TB free by the regional timeline. I also wish the SAARC Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS Centre every success in this endeavour.

Kathmandu, 24 March 2020

(Esala Ruwan Weerakoon)