Message from the Secretary General of SAARC on World TB Day, 24th March 2015

Today, on the 24th of March 2015, the World Tuberculosis (TB) Day, the SAARC Region joins the global community to commemorate it as SAARC TB Day under the theme - “Reach the three million; Find, Treat, Cure TB”. This theme highlights the suffering that TB continues to exert on people, despite the fact that effective diagnostic and treatment measures are available through TB control programs.

According to the WHO 2014 Global TB Report, three million TB cases are missed every year by health systems. In the SAARC region three million people get TB every year, however 1.2 million are missed every year by the health systems. Among those missed are most vulnerable to TB including very poor, malnourished, people living with HIV/AIDS, children and women, migrants, prisoners, refugees and internally displaced persons, minors, the elderly, ethnic minorities, indigenous populations, drug users and homeless persons.

There is a critical need to address the gap of three million and 1.2 million globally and in the region respectively, following the theme on reaching the missed cases. This requires sustained and predictable funding, political engagement and support with the involvement of communities, people affected and civil society.

This World TB Day 2015 will signal a renewed effort to alert Ministers of Health to the global, regional and national TB emergency, emphasizing the unacceptable situation that many cases of TB go undiagnosed, untreated or are not cured. It is a chance to engage with National TB Programme Managers and other stakeholders to improve the quality of existing programmes and the access to care and services.

The post-2015 End TB Strategy aims to end the TB pandemic by 2035. This requires a dramatic change to take place over the next few years in how we fight TB. Our current tools use technology that is old, with treatment regimens that are long, therefore new innovation and tools are hopefully invented in the coming years, to effectively fight the TB pandemic.

The SAARC region, with the estimated annual incidence of three million TB cases, carries 34% of the global burden of TB. Four of the eight Member States in the Region
are among the 22 high burden countries with the highest burden of TB, namely Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.

To this end, the SAARC TB and HIV/AIDS Centre should continue to work with National TB Programmes of SAARC Member States and all other stakeholders to ensure maximum coverage with appropriate strategies to fight TB. This demands that Governments employ innovative partnerships with all including the civil society and the private sector.

SAARC Member States are highly committed to tackling the major public health problems including TB and HIV/AIDS. The commitment is both at the national & regional level. The epidemiology of TB & HIV/AIDS is such that sustained effort is required for a long period in order to control these problems. Thus, the establishment of SAARC TB & HIV/AIDS Centre (STAC) is one of the historic milestones to address all these challenges in South Asia. The STAC works with the mission to support the efforts of National TB and HIV/AIDS Control Programmes through evidence based policy guidance, coordination and technical support & with a goal to minimize the mortality and morbidity due to TB and HIV/AIDS in the region and to minimize the transmission of both infections until TB and HIV/AIDS cease to be major public health problems in the SAARC Region.

In commemorating this day, I would like to call on national authorities and development partners to strengthen TB prevention and control initiatives in the Region to stem the tide of this epidemic. I also call for intensified global/regional solidarity to ensure that all people are free from fear of tuberculosis and its devastating effects.