Message from the Secretary General of SAARC on World TB Day, 24 March 2016

World TB Day and SAARC TB Day is held each year on March 24th and aims to build public awareness for tuberculosis, a disease which despite being curable, remains a destructive epidemic in many parts of the world.

World TB Day is an opportunity for people everywhere to join this fight by helping to educate others about TB and by urging governments to take action. We believe that together we can End TB once and for all, and the theme for this year’s World TB Day Unite to End TB! has rightly called for a united fight to end TB from our communities across the globe.

The post-2015 End TB Strategy aims to end the TB pandemic by 2035, for which a dramatic change needs to take place over the next few years in how we fight TB. I hope that the “End TB Strategy” facilitates accelerating the fight against tuberculosis and the fight for those most affected by it: the poorest, most vulnerable, socially marginalized and inequitably served. TB is a public health scourge, a health security threat and a development challenge. While global trends in the lives saved through effective TB diagnosis and treatment shows positive results, 3.6 million people with TB are still missed by health systems every year and therefore may not get adequate care they need. Also, in 2014 alone, an estimated 480,000 people developed multi-drug resistant TB (MDR-TB) globally.

The SAARC Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS Centre (STAC) has developed the SAARC Regional Strategy for Control/Elimination of Tuberculosis (2013-2017). National TB Control Programmes of the Member States are implementing their programmes in line with the SAARC TB Elimination Strategy and showing satisfactory
trends in terms of decline in TB related deaths and incidence. The STAC has also developed HIV/AIDS and TB/HIV Co-infection strategies to address the issues and challenges in the context of the SAARC Region.

In terms of progress in TB control, all Member States in the SAARC Region have sustained country wide access to directly observed treatment, short-course (DOTS). The SAARC region, with an estimated annual incidence of 3.1 million TB cases, carries 32% of the global burden of TB and estimated deaths due to TB was 0.37 million in 2014. 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.

The epidemiology of tuberculosis & HIV/AIDS is such that sustained effort is required for a long period in order to control these problems. SAARC Member States are highly committed to tackle these major public health problems of TB, HIV/AIDS and TB-HIV Co-infection and the commitment is both at the national & regional level.

In commemorating this day, I would like to call on national authorities of the Member States and development partners to strengthen TB prevention and control initiatives in the Region to stem the tide of this epidemic.

Finally, I would urge all Member States to spread the message that TB is fully curable with appropriate and full course of treatment available.

Let our voices, and our efforts, reach every TB patient.

Kathmandu, Nepal

Secretary General