MESSAGE

“‘Yes! We can end TB!'”

Every year, the World TB Day and the SAARC TB Day are observed on 24 March with the objective to raise public awareness as well as to advocate for broader commitments for TB control and prevention.

The theme for this year, “Yes! We can end TB!”, aims to combat TB beyond health system, which requires strong multi-sectoral collaboration and an effective accountability system. The chosen theme is topical given the urgent need to raise visibility and political commitment to increase investments, continue to include TB in priority public health programmes and implement national as well as global recommendations.

TB is one of the top infectious killers worldwide. It is estimated that 1.6 million people died from TB and 4.2 million people were undiagnosed and unreported in 2021. About 10.6 million people fell ill with TB in 2021. Drug Resistance TB has escalated by 3.1% in 2021 compared to 2020. It is, therefore, necessary to strengthen diagnosis and access to care.

In the SAARC Region, in 2021, an estimated 4 million cases accounted for 38% of the global burden of TB with 0.6 million deaths. During the year, there were 2.8 million notified cases and 2.6 million new and relapse cases.

More investment towards supporting the roll out of the WHO-recommended TB preventive treatments, Shorter TB Treatment Regimens, Rapid molecular diagnostics for TB, DR TB, TB infection, other innovations and digital tools are needed to save millions of lives. Similarly, sustained investment in research and innovation is vital to fast-track efforts to reach the “End TB” targets.

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected the National TB Programmes of the Member States. Challenges of the National TB Programmes like unreported cases, adverse economic and social situations, funding gaps, and inadequate involvement of private sectors, CBOs and NGOs need urgent attention and commitment from all stakeholders. There is also the need to modify guidelines and introduce innovative treatment modalities.

On this Day, I congratulate the SAARC Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS Centre (STAC) for its continued support to the National TB Programmes of the Member States.

(Esala Ruwan Weerakoon)