

19/06/2003

PM calls for greater collaboration

reports on "WHO Global Conference on SARS 2003" by Annie Freeda Cruetz; PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has called for greater international collaboration in light of future out-break of infectious diseases.

World Health Organisation director-general Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, who met the Prime Minister yesterday, said he also called for greater openness, transparency and capacity for global public health.

"Dr Mahathir was interested in knowing about the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) out-break, WHO's experiences and what happened at the Global Conference on SARS," she said after closing the two-day conference attended by some 1,400 delegates from 192 countries at the Sunway Lagoon Resort Hotel.

"He himself has also been active in another major public health breakthrough in the last couple of months, which is the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control."

Dr Brundtland added that Dr Mahathir said Malaysia fully supported the convention.

She said people were becoming more aware of the health link between weakened resistance to diseases and smoking.

Earlier, Dr Brundtland and WHO's regional director for the Western Pacific Region Dr Shigeru Omi called on Dr Mahathir at his office in Putrajaya.

On the world's responses to SARS, Dr Brundtland said travel advisories might still be imposed in the future if the disease returned in a fresh out-break.

"Hopefully it doesn't return, but there is a chance it might. If it does return and spreads in the way it has, there will be a need for travel advisories," she said.

"There is no way to avoid the spread of disease if you are not willing to do what it takes," she added.

WHO's earlier warnings against non-essential travel to SARS-affected areas drew protest from the authorities of those places, such as Canada, Hong Kong and Taiwan, due to the impact on their economies and tourism industries.

At present, travel advisories remain against Beijing and Hong Kong.

Dr Brundtland said countries should now evaluate their respective experiences of handling SARS to pick out elements which could be added to international health regulations on preventing epidemics.

"It would be helpful for everyone if there were a global agreement on this," she said.

On the possible re-emergence of the disease, Dr Brundtland said: "Things are going in the right direction and my advice is for countries to continue with their strict vigilance, avoid re-occurrence of the disease where it has tapered off or even gone.

"Do not be complacent thinking SARS is over. As long as the virus is there, it can spread," said Dr Brundtland, who will be visiting Hong Kong tomorrow to have a first-hand look of the health screening system at the international airport.

To a question on whether the world had seen the worst of an infectious disease, she said new diseases had been emerging at the rate of one per year for the last 20 years.

"It just illustrates that we are up for new challenges even in the

future. Our capacity to identify and react is important," she added.

On international research on SARS, Dr Brundtland said WHO would help guide the scientific community on priority areas, but added that Governments had to sustain their interest and financing of such efforts.

"WHO is not a sack of money. We will provide the focus, but scientists and politicians have to keep on being interested to do the work," she said.