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Building resilient health systems to advance universal health coverage and promote health security in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

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Honourable Chair, Distinguished Delegates,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the International Council of Nurses and the over 27 million nurses worldwide.

ICN acknowledges the World Health Organization Eastern Mediterranean report on building resilient health systems to advance universal health coverage and promote health security in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of building resilient health systems and highlighted the vital role of health personnel in continuing to provide essential health services during health emergencies. A healthy and well-protected health workforce is fundamental to resilient health systems.

Nurses, accounting for almost 50% of health professionals in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, are critical to advancing universal health coverage and promoting health security in the region. However, evidence shows that the pandemic has caused immense damage to individual nurses and the global nursing workforce. ICN is highly concerned about the long-term impact of COVID-19 on the nursing workforce including the persistence of high workloads in difficult working conditions, the rising rates of mental distress and the worsening of nursing workforce shortages. ICN's recent report 'Sustain and Retain in 2022 and Beyond' shows high levels of nurse burnout and increased turnover. The evidence identifies a very high risk that shortages will be exacerbated by the pandemic. The ongoing and worsening shortage of nurses is now the greatest threat to global health and health security.

Considering this, it is crucial to include the health and safety of the healthcare workforce for future health system building. ICN strongly urges Member States to ensure decent working environments and appropriate working hours, provide training and continuous education on infection control, ensure adequate and regular remuneration, rapidly scale up psychological support to nurses and other health workers and effectively recruit and retain the nursing workforce.

To sustain and retain the nursing workforce, ICN urges Member States to implement and monitor the policy priorities of the Global Strategic Directions for Nursing and Midwifery with a sharp focus on health worker safety and wellbeing. We urgently need Member States to take practical actions to support, protect and invest in nurses.

The **International Council of Nurses (ICN)** is a federation of more than 130 national nurses associations representing the millions of nurses worldwide. Operated by nurses and leading nursing internationally, ICN works to ensure quality nursing care for all and sound health policies globally.