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Achieving UHC, SDGs and health security through stronger and more comprehensive PHC

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Honourable Chair, Distinguished Delegates,

The International Council of Nurses (ICN) acknowledges the World Health Organization South-East Asia report on 'Achieving UHC, SDGs and health security through stronger and more comprehensive PHC.' We support the actions proposed to improve access to quality, safe and affordable comprehensive Primary Health Care (PHC).

A strong PHC system is critical for the attainment of universal health coverage. Whilst much attention was devoted to responding to the pandemic, the disaster has affected many non-COVID-19 patients who were unable to access needed care. The indirect health impacts include people with delayed diagnosis, cancelled or delayed care. PHC needs to be resilient enough to cater for unexpected surge capacity whilst also maintaining continuity of care.

ICN would like to highlight the importance of investing in nursing to optimize primary health care and support its response to health emergencies whilst ensuring continuity of care for people.

The ability to achieve Comprehensive Universal Health Coverage will be dependent on a high performing primary health care system. We emphasize that this will require a motivated, equitably distributed PHC workforce that is aligned with population and community health needs. Sustaining this will require building capacity to meet the growing demand which is driven by rapid demographic, epidemiological, economic, social and political changes.

ICN recognises that the health care workforce is under pressure, particularly in PHC. The South East Asia region has one of the lowest densities of nurses in the world. The region will require a minimum of two million nurses by 2030 to achieve health for all. In addition, we believe that the workforce is not being used to its potential and there is a widening gap between the needs of the health care and education systems producing the health professional workforce.

ICN commends WHO SEARO's commitment to strengthen the nursing and midwifery workforce with a focus on quality education, safe, healthy and satisfying work environments and nursing and midwifery leadership and management. To achieve this commitment requires nursing leadership. ICN is concerned that just over half of countries in the region have a Chief Nursing Officer position.

ICN represents the almost 28 million nurses globally, the largest health professional group providing PHC around the world. ICN and its members call on Member States to:

- Commit to developing regional and national action plans related to building and supporting the PHC health professional workforce



- Commit to investing and implementing the WHO Global Strategic Directions for Nursing and Midwifery with its focus on four key areas: invest in nursing education, nursing jobs, nursing leadership, and nursing practice and service delivery
- Commit to integrated and team-based PHC to deliver effective and comprehensive care
- Consider developing and building the Advanced Practice Nursing workforce to improve access to PHC
- Support and invest in Chief Nursing Officer positions across all countries and within SEARO WHO.

These recommendations will improve access to quality, safe and affordable PHC that is able to meet surge demand as the need arises. We look forward to working with you on this important programme.

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.