

## UN assembly backs steps to fight chronic disease

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UNITED NATIONS (Reuters) - World leaders risk economic damage if they do not tackle killers like cancer and diabetes in concert with the industries that affect public health, a high-level U.N. meeting on chronic disease heard.

The General Assembly session on noncommunicable diseases on Monday and Tuesday is only the second such meeting in United Nations history to focus on global health, after nations came together to address the AIDS epidemic 10 years ago.

"Our collaboration is more than a public health necessity. Noncommunicable diseases are a threat to development," U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told the meeting. "NCDs hit the poor and vulnerable particularly hard and drive them deeper into poverty."

Chronic diseases kill more than 36 million people a year and will cost the global economy nearly \$47 trillion in the next 20 years, the World Economic Forum says. The number of deaths could rise to 52 million per year in that time, according to the World Health Organization.

Nations face a difficult and complex task in drawing up a global action plan to fight heart disease, cancer, diabetes, mental illness and respiratory disease -- many of which are linked to choices about diet, tobacco, alcohol and exercise.

They need cooperation from companies that make food, drug and tobacco products, as well as from employers that may have environmentally hazardous workplaces.

Expectations going into the meeting already had been lowered, as wealthy nations and multinational corporations were unlikely to accept a financial hit in the near term to help fund and promote the initiatives among poorer nations.

Monday, the General Assembly adopted a declaration recognizing the economic and social burdens of chronic disease, without setting specific goals to reduce their impact.

Recommendations included promoting healthier diets, tobacco-free workplaces, access to cancer screening programs and breast-feeding for about six months from birth, as well as encouraging alliances to discover new medicines.

## Important Start

Members of the health community said the effort was an important start nonetheless.

"It brought a lot of attention to noncommunicable diseases," said Professor K.M. Venkat Narayan, a public health professor at Emory University in Atlanta, who attended the meeting.

"What is missing is a commitment to action ... Everybody is talking about what they have done so far. They are not talking about what needs to get done and what it will take."

Ann Keeling, chairwoman of the NCD Alliance, an umbrella organization for health groups, said governments should use the

momentum from the summit to seek "ambitious targets to curb the epidemic."

While often thought of as diseases of the rich world -- linked to fatty, sugary foods, little exercise and too much alcohol and tobacco -- NCDs now disproportionately affect people in poorer nations. More than 80 percent of NCD deaths are among people in low and middle income countries.

"It's a positive that the U.N. has dedicated a conference to noncommunicable disease," Chris Viehbacher, chief executive of French drugmaker Sanofi told Reuters in an interview in New York. "The first thing that had to be done is to get away from this mind-set, this belief, this prejudice almost if you like, that it's all around communicable disease."

The WHO said Sunday poorer countries could introduce measures to prevent and treat millions of cases of cancer, heart disease, diabetes and lung disease for as little as \$1.20 per person per year.

One of the biggest question marks is the role of major tobacco and food companies, whose products have already come under fire in western countries for playing a role in rising rates of obesity and respiratory disorders.

Dr. John Seffrin, chief executive of the American Cancer Society, told Reuters ahead of the meeting that the food industry and major drugmakers would likely cooperate.

"They will step up to the plate and will be responsible corporate citizens and follow up with practices to improve access to quality food and nutrition," he said.

"Tobacco is the only renegade industry. They put profits over peoples' lives. I don't anticipate they'll do anything positive."

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