DAMASCUS, Syria ¦ 7 January 2014 – Over the past two weeks the World Health Organization (WHO) delivered two shipments with more than 125 tons of medical equipment and medicines to health providers in Aleppo, Syria -- in both government-controlled and in opposition-controlled areas. All shipments contained surgical materials, medicines to treat chronic and infectious diseases, infant incubators, ventilators and intensive care unit (ICU) beds.

The first shipment containing 26 tons of medical supplies to treat more than 55,000 patients was delivered on 24 December to the Aleppo Teaching Hospital. The second shipment containing 80 tons of supplies to treat more than 213,000 patients was delivered to NGOs, local health authorities and to the Syrian Red Crescent Society (SRCS) in Aleppo's contested areas on 3 January. In addition, an estimated 118,000 patients can be treated with another shipment of 20 tons of supplies which were delivered to the Syrian Ministry of Health in Aleppo.

Since the beginning of the crisis in Syria, the health situation has been deteriorating with shortages of medicines and health workers, destruction of health facilities and difficult access to health care. With the substantial damage to pharmaceutical plants, local production of medicines has been reduced by 65 – 70%. Prior to March 2011, 90% of medicines in Syria were locally produced. Medicine prices on the black market have risen steeply and are not available to the majority of the population, especially, in the rural areas.

These shipments continue the steady supply of medicine and medical supplies to all sides of the conflict. In 2013, WHO and its partners distributed medical supplies for 4.6 million people, supported mobile health clinics and other service delivery through 36 local NGOs and other health partners, trained almost 2,500 local health workers on infectious diseases and outbreak response, chemical hazard, surveillance, malnutrition and mental health.

WHO has also established the Early Warning, Alert and Response System (EWARS) to be the front line to detect the earliest signs of a disease outbreak. Detecting an outbreak in the earliest stages is the key to preventing the spread of disease. Currently more than 400 sites are reporting into the system from health facilities around the country.

WHO continues to be concerned about attacks on health facilities and health workers, and urges all parties in the conflict to respect the integrity and neutrality of health facilities. International Humanitarian Law under the Geneva Conventions provides for the protection of health workers, patients and facilities, and all sides of conflict must honor those agreements.