10 June: On World Blood Donor Day – 14 June – the World Health Organization (WHO) is calling on countries to improve access to safe blood for saving the lives of mothers.

Every day, almost 800 women die from causes related to complications of pregnancy and childbirth. Severe bleeding during pregnancy, delivery or after childbirth is the single biggest cause of maternal death and can kill a healthy woman within 2 hours if she is unattended. Urgent access to safe supplies of blood for transfusion is critical to saving these women's lives.

"When a new mother dies, not only does her baby face greater risk of death, malnourishment and lifelong disadvantage, but the whole family's wellbeing is affected," says Dr Margaret Chan, WHO Director-General. "If all obstetric facilities provided safe blood for transfusion, many of these mothers' lives could be saved."

The safest source of blood is from regular, voluntary unpaid donors whose blood is screened for infections. A World Health Assembly resolution in 2010 highlights that a secure supply of safe blood components, based on voluntary, non-remunerated blood donation, is an important national goal to prevent blood shortages.

Today, in many low- and middle-income countries, blood supply is critically inadequate. Sub-Saharan Africa, which has the highest maternal mortality rate in the world of 510 deaths per 100 000 live births, also has the lowest blood donation rates.

According to the latest WHO survey on blood safety and availability, 40 African countries collect less than 10 blood donations per 1000 population per year; of these, 25 countries collect less than half the blood that they need to meet transfusion requirements. High-income countries collect around 35 donations per 1000 population per year.

In many countries, family members are often pressured to donate blood or find a replacement donor in an emergency situation. This causes emotional and financial stress and significant delays in obtaining suitable blood, and also puts women at risk of bloodborne infections as there is often no time or facilities to properly screen the donated blood.

"Safe blood transfusion is one of the key life-saving interventions that should be available in all facilities that provide emergency obstetric care," says Dr Edward Kelley, Director of Service Delivery and Safety at WHO. "Yet in 2014, equitable access to safe blood for obstetric care still remains a major challenge, contributing to high maternal mortality in many countries."

Currently, 73 countries collect more than 90% of their blood supply from voluntary unpaid blood donors (38 are high-income countries, 26 middle-income countries and 9 low-income countries).

About 108 million blood donations are collected worldwide every year. Almost half of these are collected in high-income countries, home to just 15% of the world's population.

In low- and middle-income countries, a high proportion of blood supplies are needed for the

management of complications of pregnancy and childbirth as well as for treating severe childhood anaemia. In high-income countries, blood transfusion is most commonly used in heart surgery, transplant surgery, trauma and cancer therapy.

WHO maintains that providing safe and adequate supplies of blood and blood products should be an integral part of every country's efforts to improve maternal health.

The Organization provides policy guidance and technical assistance to support countries in developing national blood systems based on voluntary unpaid blood donations, and implementing quality systems to ensure that safe and quality blood and blood products are available and used appropriately for all people who need them.

World Blood Donor Day is celebrated annually around the world. It provides an opportunity to highlight the lifesaving role of voluntary unpaid blood donors and also thank those donors who give this precious gift, with no incentive to them, to save millions of lives every year.

This year Sri Lanka is hosting the global event for World Blood Donor Day in Colombo on 14 June 2014, with support from the Government of Sri Lanka, Ministry of Health and National Blood Transfusion Service of Sri Lanka, WHO and partners working on blood transfusion and maternal health. Sri Lanka has achieved remarkable success in reaching a self-sufficient blood supply in just 10 years.