WHO calls potential health cutbacks a mistake

Reuters

LONDON: Governments should resist the temptation to cut their health budgets in response to a global financial crisis, the head of the World Health Organization (WHO) has said.

WHO Director-General Margaret Chan told the Graduate Institute in Geneva that steps to repair the economy should not only focus on rekindling trade and business growth but also on fighting poverty, misery, and ill-health. The credit crisis, paired with global warming and other pressures, could have “profound, and profoundly unfair” consequences for medical care, and particular efforts to confront and prevent disease.

Cutbacks to national health budgets during previous economic crises, such as the oil shock and global recession seen 50 years ago, have caused serious problems in poorer parts of the world, said Chan, a former Hong Kong health director.

“Huge mistakes were made in the restructuring of national budgets. Health throughout sub-Saharan Africa and in large parts of Latin America and Asia has still not recovered from these mistakes,” she said. “There is too much at stake right now in our turbulent and tottering world to make the same mistakes again.”

With the costs of health care rising and systems for financial protection in disarray, personal expenditures on health now push more than 100 million people below the poverty line each year, the latest WHO World Health Report states. Annual government expenditure on health varies from as little as US$20 per person to well over US$6000. For 5.6 billion people in low- and middle-income countries, more than half of all health care expenditure is through out-of-pocket payments.

Companies including Pfizer Inc have recently announced that they expect the economic slowdown affecting investments in the medical sector and in pharmaceuticals.

Chan said it was essential that governments avoid putting health care on the backburner, stressing that healthy populations would help reinforce economies in tough times.

“Health is the very foundation of economic productivity and prosperity,” she said.