



**EUROPE**

**Regional Committee for Europe  
Fifty-eighth session**

**Tbilisi, Georgia, 15–18 September 2008**

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**Fifteenth Standing Committee of the Regional Committee  
Report of the sixth session and of special sessions**

This document contains the report of the sixth session of the Fifteenth Standing Committee of the Regional Committee (SCRC), held in Tbilisi, Georgia on Sunday 14 September 2008. It should be read in conjunction with the consolidated report of the Fifteenth SCRC (document EUR/RC58/5).



## Introduction

1. The Fifteenth Standing Committee of the Regional Committee (SCRC) held its sixth session at the Sheraton Metechi Palace Hotel in Tbilisi, Georgia on Sunday, 14 September 2008, the day before the opening of the fifty-eighth session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe (RC58).
2. In her introduction, the Chairperson thanked the host country for inviting all European Member States of WHO to RC58. The Regional Director paid tribute to the close cooperation between the Secretariat and the Standing Committee during preparations for the session. Apologies for absence were received from the member from Switzerland.

## Reports of previous sessions

3. The reports of the fifth session of the Fifteenth SCRC, held at WHO headquarters in Geneva on 18 May 2008, and of the extra session held in Tallinn, Estonia on 27 June 2008, immediately after the close of the WHO European Ministerial Conference on Health Systems, were both adopted without amendment, as were the reports of the three special sessions held by teleconference on 13 and 20 August and 2 September 2008 (see Annex).

## Review of the provisional programme of RC58

4. The Standing Committee noted that the President and the Prime Minister of Georgia were due to attend RC58 at different times and agreed that minor adjustments to the programme of the session might accordingly need to be made. The Secretariat confirmed that the topic entitled “Director-General of the World Health Organization” (a matter referred to regional committees by the Executive Board) should be considered in an open meeting and an amendment to the programme would be proposed to that end for consideration by the Regional Committee.
5. The Chairperson explained that the intention behind expanding the agenda item on “Discussion of the Regional Director’s report” into a broader “General debate” on the agenda of RC58 had been to give representatives of Member States the opportunity to express their views on subjects not specifically covered elsewhere in the programme, while ensuring a more focused debate during the remainder of the session. The SCRC agreed that it might have been more logical to schedule the general debate after such items as the address by the Regional Director, the report of the Standing Committee and consideration of matters arising out of resolutions and decisions of the World Health Assembly and the Executive Board, but it would not be appropriate to consider such changes at this stage.
6. The Standing Committee was informed that the Regional Director had received a further letter from the Deputy Minister of Health of the Russian Federation dated 10 September 2008, stating that her country would not be able to participate in RC58 but expressing the hope that her country’s nomination for membership of the Regional Search Group would be considered by Member States at the session. The Standing Committee recommended that, during the opening of RC58, the outgoing President of the fifty-seventh session should give the necessary background information, explaining that all the criteria for holding the session had been met and that all possible steps had been taken to ensure the participation of all Member States; he should then ask the members of the Regional Committee whether they would have any objection to immediate suspension of Rule 14.2.2(d) of the Rules of Procedure of the Regional Committee, at the request of the Russian Federation.

## **Membership of WHO bodies and committees**

7. The SCRC was informed that the Regional Director had received a fax from the Director, Department of International Cooperation at the Polish Ministry of Health dated 11 September 2008, informing him of a change in that country's candidate for membership of both the Executive Board and the Standing Committee.

8. The Standing Committee reached agreement on the candidates that it would recommend for membership of the SCRC, the Policy and Coordination Committee of the Special Programme of Research, Development and Research Training in Human Reproduction, and the Regional Search Group (RSG). The SCRC recalled that it had explored, earlier in the year, the question of amending the three-person composition of the RSG to reflect the four subregional groupings used for membership of the Executive Board; since that had not proved to be possible within the time available, it was recommending that one of the alternate members of the RSG should be identified as "primus inter pares".

9. While no consensus view emerged about candidates for membership of the Executive Board, the SCRC agreed to inform Member States' delegations about their deliberations; the Chairperson would seek the advice of the Organization's Legal Counsel on the best way of doing that.

## **Other matters**

### **Officers of RC58**

10. The Standing Committee endorsed the Secretariat's proposals for officers of RC58.

## **Conclusion**

11. The outgoing members of the SCRC paid tribute to the skill with which the Chairperson had guided the work of the Standing Committee during the year.

## *Annex*

### **Report of the first special session**

#### **Introduction**

1. The Fifteenth Standing Committee of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe (SCRC) on Wednesday 13 August 2008 held a special session by teleconference, convened under Rule 5 of the Rules of Procedure of the SCRC. The meeting was called to review the situation in Georgia and any implication that might have for the fifty-eighth session of the Regional Committee for Europe (RC58). As a result of technical problems, Dr Francesco Cicogna (Italy) and Dr Marat Mambetov (Kyrgyzstan) could not be connected to the meeting, and Dr Danka Farkasova (Slovakia) was connected for only part of the meeting.

#### **Fifty-eighth session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe**

2. The Minister of Health of Georgia had been invited to attend the meeting to give his Government's view of the situation in the country and its implications for the holding of RC58 in Tbilisi in September 2008. He described the capital city as calm, and said that its infrastructure, financial sector and transport system were functioning. The Georgian Government was optimistic that the mediation process, in which the European Union and European Commission were involved, would bring an end to the problems within a few days. The Government was grateful for the considerable amounts of humanitarian aid sent by other countries; the country's health sector was coping well with the large numbers of people being treated in its hospitals and was not in need of any additional medical equipment or pharmaceutical supplies.

3. The President and Government of Georgia were looking forward to hosting RC58 as planned.

4. The SCRC members expressed their empathy with the people of Georgia and welcomed the optimism expressed regarding future developments. There was consensus that RC58 should indeed go ahead as planned but that the Regional Director should draw up a contingency plan to be activated if needed. It was also agreed that the Member States should be informed immediately of that decision. Given the time needed for the necessary visa and travel arrangements to be made to ensure full participation, no specific dates could yet be proposed for RC58 to be held at an alternative venue.

5. The Chairperson of the SCRC asked the Secretariat to draft a letter, for signature by herself and the Regional Director, to be sent to Member States the following day.

6. The sixth meeting of the fifteenth SCRC was scheduled to be held prior to RC58 in Batumi, Georgia. The SCRC decided that, in view of the situation, the venue should be changed to Tbilisi, and the date to the Sunday prior to RC58.

7. The Chairperson of the SCRC and the Regional Director agreed to keep in regular contact with each other and the Government of Georgia, and to convene another meeting of the SCRC when required. The Legal Office at WHO headquarters would provide guidance where appropriate.

## Report of the second special session

### Introduction

1. Following on from its special session held on 13 August 2008, the Fifteenth Standing Committee of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe (SCRC) held a second special session by teleconference on 20 August 2008, to continue its review of any implications that the situation in Georgia might have for the fifty-eighth session of the Regional Committee for Europe (RC58). As a result of technical problems, Dr Marat Mambetov (Kyrgyzstan) and Dr Danka Farkasova (Slovakia) were unable to take part in the teleconference.

### Fifty-eighth session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe

2. The Minister of Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia described the situation in Tbilisi, the capital city, as being as normal as it had ever been: flights by foreign airlines were taking place on schedule, and hotels were accommodating large numbers of dignitaries and journalists. However, the western part of the country was less stable: while no military confrontations were occurring, and exchanges of prisoners of war and civilians had taken place, there were extensive movements of internally displaced persons and refugees. Nonetheless, the infrastructure was being repaired, the state was functioning as a state, and the Government firmly reconfirmed its willingness and readiness to host RC58.

3. The Regional Director, who was on mission in Georgia, reported that he had met with the UN Resident Coordinator in Georgia, Mr Robert Watkins, representatives of international organizations and the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs, and other government officials, as well as the First Lady of Georgia, who had been invited to be a guest speaker at RC58. Given a very fluid and fast changing situation in Georgia, it seemed premature to make a final decision about the RC58 at present. He had also met members of the WHO team in the country, who had emphasized that people, and in particular refugees, felt morally supported by the presence of international organizations, and that holding the RC session in Tbilisi would contribute to that moral support. On the other hand, the country was able to deal with the necessary logistic activities in order to host the session.

4. The SCRC members reiterated their empathy with the people of Georgia and welcomed the first-hand information provided by the Minister and the Regional Director. Nonetheless, they realized that the situation on the ground continued to be very fluid and unpredictable.

5. In response to a question from the Chairperson of the SCRC about the feasibility of holding RC58 at the WHO Regional Office for Europe in Copenhagen on the dates originally planned (15–18 September 2008), the Director, Administration and Finance noted that a minimum of three weeks would be needed, after receipt of the formal invitation letter, in order for representatives of all countries to be assured of obtaining visas for entry into Denmark and that it would be difficult (and expensive) to find hotel accommodation in or near Copenhagen at such short notice. In addition, financial costs might be incurred if the agreement with the original host country were broken. On the basis of that information, the SCRC recognized that it needed to take a decision at the current meeting as to whether RC58 should be held in Copenhagen on the dates originally planned. It accordingly agreed that it would be inadvisable to move the session to Copenhagen on those dates.

6. The remaining options were then identified:

- (a) to continue to make arrangements to hold RC58 in Tbilisi from 15 to 18 September 2008;
- (b) to hold the session in Tbilisi at a later date; or
- (c) to hold the session in Copenhagen at a later date.

The SCRC member from Georgia stressed that his government strongly believed that RC58 should take place in that country, as decided by the Regional Committee in resolution EUR/RC57/R3 one year before.

WHO, like the United Nations as a whole, should remain a neutral party in conflict situations: moving the session away from Georgia would have significant political implications and would be liable to misinterpretation. He confirmed that his country would also be able and willing to host the session at a later date.

7. The Regional Director informed the SCRC that, in order to ensure regional input into the Executive Board's discussion of the proposed programme budget 2010–2011, and to fit in with the Director-General's schedule, RC58 should be held no later than the end of October or early November 2008. In addition, he noted that he would visit Moscow the following week to discuss WHO assistance to the humanitarian situation with the Ministry of Health and Social Development of the Russian Federation and he would also discuss RC58.

8. The SCRC accordingly agreed that it would hold a further teleconference on 1 or 2 September 2008, to make a final decision on whether RC58 should be held in Tbilisi on the dates originally planned, taking account of the security situation and of conditions governing travel, insurance, etc. at that time. Should the decision be taken to postpone RC58, the SCRC recommended that the original dates scheduled for RC58 (15–18 September 2008) could be used for a special session of the SCRC to be held at the Regional Office in Copenhagen to make a final decision with regard to the appropriate place and date for RC58. The members expressed their hope that, in case of a postponement, the place could remain as Tbilisi.

9. The Chairperson of the SCRC asked the Secretariat to draft a letter to Member States, for signature by herself and the Regional Director, informing them of the decision taken at the current meeting. She also asked the Secretariat to ensure that the report of the meeting clearly set out the various options under consideration, so that SCRC members could hold consultations at national level before the next teleconference on 1 or 2 September 2008.

## Report of the third special session

### Introduction

1. The Fifteenth Standing Committee of the Regional Committee (SCRC) held a third special session by teleconference on Tuesday 2 September 2008, convened under the provisions of Rule 5 of the Rules of Procedure of the SCRC, to continue its review of any implications that the situation in Georgia might have for the fifty-eighth session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe (RC58). All members of the SCRC took part in the teleconference.

### Fifty-eighth session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe

2. The Minister of Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia reported that the general situation in Tbilisi, as well as security, was markedly better than two weeks previously: airports, hotels and banks were operating normally, and a high-level meeting of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was therefore going ahead as planned on 16 September 2008. There should be no problems with visas, either: personal letters of invitation were being sent out to participants who needed them, and the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had been requested to instruct its embassies and consulates to process the issuance of visas within three working days.

3. He emphasized that the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia had no intention of politicizing the event. Indeed, keeping to the dates originally planned testified to a desire not to link the holding of the event to the current situation. Preparations were well advanced and were going ahead without obstacles; the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs was ready to welcome all participants and extend hospitality to them on an equal footing.

4. The Regional Director reported that he had visited the Ministry of Health and Social Development of the Russian Federation in Moscow on Thursday 28 August 2008, to review the situation with regard to refugees (an assessment mission would be conducted with staff from the WHO Country Office) and to discuss the upcoming RC58. Mutual assurances had been given that no political use would be made of RC58, and that the Russian delegation would participate and would have full access to the host country and the right and possibility of full participation in the session. The Russian delegation's credentials had also been handed to the Regional Director. Just before the present session of the SCRC, the Regional Director had received a letter from the Deputy Minister of Health of the Russian Federation stating that "Georgia's unilateral breaking of diplomatic relations with the Russian Federation ... made it problematic for the Russian delegation to take part in the work" of RC58.

5. The Regional Director had also that morning received a message by electronic mail from the Director, Department of Operational Support and Services at WHO headquarters, informing him that the "situation in Tbilisi has returned to normal" and there were "no identified threats for the time being" and "security clearances can be granted. No problems therefore to have the RC session in Tbilisi".

6. The Organization's Legal Counsel confirmed that WHO and the host country had an obligation to ensure equal conditions for the participation of all Member States in sessions of the governing bodies, but that countries had the right not to participate in such sessions if they did not so wish. The Minister of Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia observed that the breaking of diplomatic relations did not prevent the free movement of relatives or of official delegations and that a host country invitation letter had been sent to the Ministry of Health and Social Development of the Russian Federation for visa purposes. The Regional Director gave an assurance that the preparations for RC58 being made by WHO were being done for all Member States.

7. In response to a question raised by one member of the SCRC about the requirement set out in Rule 14.2.2(d) of the Rules of Procedure of the Regional Committee whereby "Member States having submitted nominations for membership of committees and other bodies must be represented at the Regional Committee during the agenda item in question", Legal Counsel noted that Rule 48 allowed for



any rule to be suspended, either with forty-eight hours' notice or, if the Regional Committee was unanimously in favour of such a proposal, immediately and without notice.

8. The Chairperson of the SCRC raised the issue of travel insurance for participants in RC58. However, a number of countries were reviewing the travel advisory for Georgia currently in force; if restrictions were not completely lifted, a special insurance was often required (at a higher cost). The Regional Director pointed out that the Organization was constrained by strict rules related to the financial support that it could give countries to attend sessions of the governing bodies, but that it was ready to help where feasible.

9. Summing up, the Chairperson recalled that at its previous special session the SCRC had agreed to make a final decision, on 2 September 2008, on whether RC58 should be held in Tbilisi on the dates originally planned, taking account of the security situation and of conditions governing travel, insurance, etc. at that time. Both the Georgian authorities and the United Nations currently assessed the security situation as acceptable. Conditions governing travel (flights and visas) and insurance would not preclude holding RC58 as planned, and assurances had been given that all Member States would have the opportunity to attend the session.

10. The SCRC therefore unanimously decided that RC58 should go ahead as planned in Tbilisi from 15 to 18 September 2008. In the meantime, the Regional Director and the Chairperson of the SCRC would send a joint letter to all Member States of WHO in the European Region, explaining the SCRC's decision.

11. The Fifteenth SCRC agreed to hold its final regular session in Tbilisi at 11:00 on Sunday 14 September 2008, the day before the opening of RC58.