

Supporting Nepal's candidate for Regional Director of WHO-SEARO

8 October 2023, Kathmandu

There is an increasing number of highly qualified Nepali citizens with world-class credentials in various professions internationally, yet even today there are few in senior leadership positions in the United Nations system. An opportunity has arisen with filling the vacancy for the Regional Director of the World Health Organisation's Southeast Asia regional office (SEARO), which also oversees the South Asia region.

We welcome the Government of Nepal's nomination of a highly qualified candidate, Dr. Shambhu Acharya, for this important position and for investing effort to mobilise support for his candidature. The Regional Director's position is vitally important for the future health and wellbeing of hundreds of millions in our region, where medical and public health challenges must be monitored and overseen by capable leadership within WHO.

It is obvious to us that Dr. Acharya is the better fit between the two candidates nominated for the position. He possesses a very strong public health background and has extensive leadership experience in tackling global health issues. Dr. Acharya has impeccable credentials with a PhD in public health, specialising in health policy and planning from a globally renowned university; a Masters in Sociology focusing on social policy; and an MBA in public finance and strategic management.

Dr. Acharya knows the public health and medical challenges of our region intimately, having worked for three decades strengthen responses at local, national, regional and global levels, including in Nepal, Bangladesh and India, apart from his responsibilities at WHO headquarters in Geneva. Dr. Acharya managed large-scale World Bank-funded projects in health and population in Bangladesh and played a key role in establishing the Asia-Pacific Health Economics Network to build the health financing capacity of WHO member states.

Working directly with the Director-General WHO, Dr. Acharya has been part of high-level policy and strategy decisions, which have also included interactions with heads of government, ministers, and health professionals all over the Asian continent. He has represented WHO in various UN bodies advocating for universal health coverage within the broader UN development agenda. Most recently, Dr. Acharya played a central role in ensuring that WHO was effective in response to the COVID-19 crisis in the most seriously affected countries.

Dr. Acharya has authored an impressive list of papers in various areas of health and development that gives him a high level of credibility in global and regional public health circles. His vision statement for the SEARO candidacy is clear, succinct, innovative and forward-looking.

Several highly respected global health journals, such as *The Lancet*, the *British Medical Journal* and others have highlighted the importance of the WHO-SEARO Regional Director's position and called for the appointment of a suitably qualified candidate for the post. Dr. Acharya has been acknowledged by many global health professionals and leaders as the most qualified candidate for this crucial position, even beyond the present contest.

In contrast, the only other candidate in competition for the position is regarded by the public health and medical fraternity as a political protégé with a privileged pedigree whose thin resumé is not adequate to lead a complex global health institution such as WHO-SEARO. The unabashed, high-profile lobbying at senior most political levels, aided by a mother's access to global leaders at unrelated summits and conclaves, has generated cautionary commentary not only in public health circles but also in journals of renown and credible international media.

In the current post-Covid public health environment with its numerous challenges, including those related to income disparities, climate crisis, and the potential surge of new vectors with potential for great destruction, UN leaders steering health issues must have strong credentials and proven dynamism.

Because Dr. Acharya achieving the position of Regional Director would be beneficial for our entire region, we believe the Government of Nepal must redouble efforts among concerned governments of the region in favour of his outstanding candidacy. Further, we demand a transparent election process so that the better qualified candidate is elected to this important position.

Signatories:

Amb Nilamber Acharya, Former Minister, Ambassador, Political Analyst, Author
Dr Kul C Gautam, Former Assistant Secretary General & Deputy Executive Director, UNICEF
Prof. Rita Thapa, Formerly Pioneering Chief of Nepal's Primary Health Care; First women Director of Health Systems, WHO, SEARO; Currently, Founding Chair cum pro Bono Executive Director of BTMF, Winner of Health Minister Bloomberg Public Health Award 2023, and WHO75 Health Champion;
Dr Bhagwan Koirala, Pioneer & Leading Heart Surgeon, Strong advocate of Public Health and the Chairperson Nepal Medical Council.
Dr Naresh KC, Executive Director, Family Planning Association; Acting President, Society of Public Health in Nepal (SOPHIN), Formerly Sn Govt official.
Prof, Dr. Madhu Dixit, Executive Chair Person UDM- NINAS, Ex Associate Dean Institute of Medicine, Member High Level Nutrition and Food Security Steering Committee, NPC;
Dr Sudha Sharma, Senior Public Health Physician, Long experiences in South Asia, Africa and the UK, Codirector, Ciwec,
Dr Badri Raj Pande, Eminent Public Health Expert; Former Govt of Nepal Official and Regional Programme Management Officer, SEARO. WHO
Mr Bishow Parajuli, formerly: UN Resident Coordinator, UNDP Resident Representative, WFP Representative and other leadership positions, WFP HQ (Contact: bishowparajuli@gmail.com; +9779862274525)