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## **22 Countries Gather in Tonga to Unite in the Fight Against NCDs at the Third Pacific NCD Forum**



The Third Pacific Non-communicable Disease (NCD) Forum has brought together more than 70 doctors, health experts, NGOs and representatives of international organizations from 22 countries to the capital Nuku'alofa, to share lessons learned and address country experiences from today's leading causes of death and morbidity in the Pacific Island Countries and territories, NCDs.

The opening ceremony for the Forum was launched by Tonga's Prime Minister, Lord Tu'ivakano, followed by a keynote address by Palauan Health Minister, Hon. Dr. Stevenson Kuartei. According to the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), who is working together with Tonga's Ministry of Health and the World Health Organization (WHO) in organizing this major meeting of NCD specialists, it is reported that diabetes, cancer and heart disease is claiming more and more lives prematurely and there is heightened will and momentum in the Pacific to combat this dreaded scourge.

The WHO estimates that 75 per cent of deaths in the Pacific are caused by NCDs. It has also identified high levels of associated risk factors such as obesity, smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, poor nutrition and lack of physical activity. SPC Healthy Pacific Lifestyle section head, Dr Viliami Puloka, said that left unabated, the increasing NCD burden will not only lead to premature death and disability for thousands of people, but will also threaten to overwhelm health resources and services already stretched thin.

He said that while 2011 can be described as 'the year of NCDs', concerted effort has to be made to raise people's consciousness and develop strategies to address this issue. The meeting will focus on building capacity in monitoring, evaluation and surveillance of NCD interventions and responses, and will provide opportunity for network building, information sharing and collaboration within PICTs.

The forum will allow the region to prepare the messages it will take to the United Nations Global Summit on NCDs on 19-20 September 2011. The forum thus provides an opportunity for PICTs to raise awareness amongst senior policy-makers of the impact of NCDs on development.

Ahead of the forum was a two-day briefing and training for regional journalists on NCDs, organised by SPC. It is hoped that the event will encourage media outlets to engage in an interactive dialogue and debate on NCDs, appropriate actions and solutions and how the media can contribute in the fight against this health problem.

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