

Korea and ASEAN to discuss collaboration regarding universal medical coverage and health security issues

한국과 아세안, 보편적 의료보장과 보건안보 협력 논의

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Lee Ki-il, the 2nd Vice Minister of Health and Welfare, attended the 1st ASEAN-ROK Health Ministers Meeting and the 9th ASEAN Plus Three (Korea-China-Japan) Health Ministers Meeting held in Bali, Indonesia on May 15 (Sun) to discuss various channels of cooperation in the health sector.

The 1st ASEAN-ROK Health Ministers Meeting was the first meeting held after the establishment of the ASEAN-ROK Health Dialogue Channel following the ASEAN-ROK Special Summit in 2019, and the meeting was agreed to be held biannually from then on, with Korea and Indonesia co-chairing this year's conference.

At this year's meeting, which was held under the theme of Strengthening Health System for Sustainable Universal Health Coverage (UHC) and Health Security for Resilient Health Systems, the ASEAN-ROK future areas of cooperation in the health sector was discussed.

Vice Minister Lee asserted that the ASEAN-ROK Healthcare Partnership cooperation projects (a.k.a. K-Health International Cooperation Project) will be carried out to share Korea's experiences in health insurance, primary health care, and public health reinforcement activities with ASEAN Member States (AMS), and emphasized that Korea will play a leading role in helping to achieve sustainable universal health coverage (UHC) suited to the health care system of each member state by building a system that leverages information and communications technologies (ICT) and capacity building activities.

In particular, he introduced how Korea was selected as the "Global Biomanufacturing Workforce Training Hub of the World Health Organization (WHO)," and asked the participants for continued interest and support for Korea as it strives to become a global vaccine hub.

He noted that Korea, with an aim to help AMS respond to infectious diseases efficiently, will continue to engage in proactive cooperation in various areas, including rapid laboratory diagnostics, EOC operations, as well as field epidemiological investigations. He went on to say that he will make sure that

extra efforts will be put forward to help overcome the COVID-19 pandemic and strengthen regional health security based on the aforementioned cooperation between Korea and ASEAN.

Vice Minister Lee also attended the 9th ASEAN Plus Three Health Ministers Meeting held on the same day and discussed ways to promote further cooperation between ASEAN and China, Japan and Korea to help better cope with public health crises.

The countries in attendance agreed on the grave need to efficiently mobilize medical resources such as human resources, essential medicines, and medical supplies during the course of a public health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and shared their experiences and visions for the future in how to address these risks.

He introduced Korea's plans for investments that are geared towards capacity-building for the medical resources supply mechanism, including plans to foster bio talents, develop antibody treatments and commercialize Korea's first COVID-19 vaccines, etc. He also said he hopes that Korea's experiences and policy cases will help the ASEAN Plus Three community improve ways resources are utilized.

The meeting was organized and adopted in the form of two joint statements prepared following the ASEAN-ROK Health Ministers Meeting and the ASEAN Plus Three Health Ministers Meeting, respectively.

The joint statements reflect the commitment of the participating countries in their endeavor to fortify future cooperation in the health sector for the major agenda items discussed during the meetings.

In particular, Indonesia's Health Minister Budi Gunadi Sadikin, who hosted this year's meetings, remarked that they served as a good opportunity to take health cooperation to the next level between the member countries.

Upon citing Korea's achievements in preventing the spread of COVID-19, he asked Korea to share valuable experiences attained over the course of the pandemic with ASEAN members.

He also stressed the need to join forces to better respond to imminent risks posed by infectious diseases as well as public health risks that could emerge in the future.

Additionally, on the sidelines of the meetings, bilateral talks between Korea and its counterpart health ministries of Indonesia and the US, were held, and common interests in public health sectors were reaffirmed and the need for reinforcing cooperative relations was agreed upon.

Although the United States is not a member of the ASEAN-related council, it was recently invited to ASEAN-US Health Ministers' Meeting after taking into account an increased need for more extensive cooperation in the health and medical fields between the US and ASEAN.

On May 15 (Sun), Vice Minister Lee and Indonesia's Health Minister Budi Gunadi Sadikin discussed matters related to cooperation such as potential medical investments and advances in the Indonesian market by Korea's pharmaceutical companies, and agreed to move forward together.

In his remarks, Minister Budi mentioned Korea's advanced medical and biotechnologies, and expressed hopes of seeing more Korean medical institutions as well as pharmaceutical & medical device companies enter and invest in the Indonesian market proactively.

In his response, Vice Minister Lee spoke of expansive support to lend to those hoping to advance into the Indonesian market, and added that a friendly environment created by Indonesia's Health Ministry will ensure that not only those who are currently doing business in Indonesia, but also those* planning to enter the Indonesian market to carry out business activities more stably will be able to do so.

Meanwhile, at this meeting, Vice Minister Lee requested the participation of Indonesia in the WHO-sponsored Global Bio-manufacturing Workforce Training Hub, as well as in the World Bio Summit 2022 to be held at the end of October this year in Korea, and in return, Minister Budi gave the Vice Minister strong assurances that Indonesia would participate.

On May 16 (Mon), Vice Minister Lee and Loyce Pace, US Assistant Secretary for Global Affairs at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) met and discussed health and medical issues between the two countries and agreed to continue dialogue and cooperation to address relevant issues.

At the meeting, Vice Minister Lee conveyed interest in having the CDC East Asia Regional Office established in Korea, and requested that the US HHS also attend the World Bio Summit to be held at the end of October this year.

In response, Assistant Secretary Pace confirmed Korea's commitment to having the regional office established, and upon mentioning Korea's leading role in the biopharmaceutical field including vaccines, which is well illustrated by its hosting of the World Bio Summit, she asserted that the ROK-US alliance should continue on their path of solidarity.

The 2nd ASEAN-ROK Health Ministers' Meeting and the 10th ASEAN Plus Three Health Ministers' Meeting are scheduled to be held in Lao PDR in 2024 with Korea and Laos as co-chairs.

// For inquiries, contact Media Relations, Ministry of Health and Welfare
044-202-2047 fairytale@korea.kr

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