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AFGHANISTAN

**Experts show way forward for polio eradication in Afghanistan**

**29 August 2010 | Kabul, Afghanistan** – A group of experts from the World Health Organization spent last week on a surveillance mission across the country with the aim to gauge the effectiveness of Afghanistan's surveillance system that is used to detect polio virus circulation among the population.

The strategy used to identify polio is to detect all children aged under 15 years with Acute Flaccid Paralysis (AFP) and then investigate the case to find a "wild poliovirus" that helps determine a polio case from a non-polio AFP case through laboratory testing.

"The first and most important step toward eliminating polio is to know where the polio virus is circulating," said Peter Graaff, WHO Representative to Afghanistan. "This is because low quality AFP surveillance can miss poliovirus transmission and we need to constantly monitor and improve the system, in order not to be misled about the level of progress made toward reaching the eradication goal.

The main recommendations of the review mission included training more community health workers on AFP surveillance, scaling up participation of the private health sector, and improved documentation of reported cases.

Based on the findings, the review members concluded that ongoing transmission of wild poliovirus in the 'reviewed' areas is very unlikely to be missed. Due to security reasons, the southern and south-eastern regions of the country could not be accessed by the team.

Polio, also known as infantile paralysis, is a highly infectious and potentially lethal disease that spreads from person to person. Wild poliovirus could infect virtually everyone who is not yet immune through vaccination, and there is no cure. Afghanistan is one of the four remaining countries in the world that has yet to become polio-free, the others being India, Nigeria and neighbouring Pakistan. In 2010 alone, Afghanistan has had 13 polio cases, especially in parts of the Southern Region where access is not possible due to insecurity.

Currently, there is a network of more than 10,000 community members coming from all walks of life across the country that report children showing signs of potential paralysis to the next (district) level of the health system. These include health workers, pharmacists, religious leaders and shrine keepers among others.

The World Health Organization, UNICEF and Rotary International are leading the efforts to eradicate polio in Afghanistan.

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