



MoPH, UNICEF & WHO joint press statement

Eradicating polio in Afghanistan now!

Kabul 23 August 2011 – Afghanistan's Ministry of Public Health (MoPH), with the support of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has launched intensified efforts to wipe out polio from the country by the end of 2012. To this end it is focusing particularly on the Southern Region, where the polio virus continues to circulate. The efforts in Afghanistan are part of a global effort to achieve the complete eradication of polio. As one of only four countries left in the world where the disease remains endemic, it is more important than ever to renew our focus on how best to use our collective resources to rid ourselves of this crippling and sometimes fatal disease.

Much progress has been made towards eradicating polio in Afghanistan. In 2011, to date, a total of 13 polio cases have been reported from only seven districts of Kandahar, Helmand and Farah provinces. No cases have been reported from elsewhere in the country, including from the Eastern and North Eastern regions, which are considered to be particularly under threat. While this is good news, it is essential to remain vigilant and continue to ensure full coverage of all immunization activities, as partially vaccinated and unvaccinated groups are at high risk. Focusing on the Southern Region involves concerted efforts to improve access to all children in conflict affected areas, as difficulties in achieving such access have in the past been a major barrier to success. Priority is also given to immunization activities in border regions in Southern and Eastern regions where there is free movement between Pakistan – another endemic country - and Afghanistan include boarder coordination between Afghanistan and Pakistan also, in order to control transition.

Low routine immunization coverage is one of the reasons the virus continues to circulate in the country, and in addition to their regular, intensive polio campaigns, the Ministry of Public Health, UNICEF, WHO and multiple technical partners are investing heavily in improving routine immunization coverage in the country. Promoting and implementing routine immunization of all newborns, infants and pregnant mothers is one of the four main strategies for Polio eradication, with a particular focus on newborns, who are at the greatest risk of contracting the virus.

In addition, as an important complement to the current routine immunization programme, the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI) has provided conditional approval of support for the introduction of Pneumococcal Pneumonia vaccine by January 2013. The MoPH is starting preparation for the introduction of this new vaccine, which will significantly reduce the currently very high rates of infant and child mortality caused by Pneumonia.

With the goal of ending the circulation of the disease within sight, the period between now and the end of 2012 marks the vital, final stage of the polio eradication initiative in Afghanistan. Independent and international bodies are providing crucially needed evaluations and reviews, helping to ensure that the polio eradication initiative in Afghanistan will continue to be well coordinated and that targeted programmes will expedite the eradication of the disease. Continued and concentrated efforts by the government, partners, donors and communities themselves are needed to ensure that no child will henceforth suffer from this disease. We look forward to working together to see the realization of this goal through our collective efforts.

For more information, please contact:

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