

Notice Prints

Posted by: niccosan

Posted on : 2006/11/22 1:10:00

Joint News Release WHO/Rotary International/CDC/UNICEF/71 22 November 2006

Kabul - The World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF, concerned about the health of all people in Afghanistan, especially the health of children, today called for the safe access of local health workers and vaccinators during polio immunization campaigns and other health activities all over Afghanistan, but particularly in the Southern Region. The latest nationwide polio campaign was launched on 19 November, with further district-level immunization activities planned for the rest of this year and throughout 2007.

Afghanistan is one of only four remaining polio-endemic countries in the world. Strong efforts by Afghan authorities last year put the country on the verge of being polio-free. However, efforts to stop an outbreak in the country's Southern Region - which could become the last polio outbreak ever in Afghanistan - have been compromised by increased insecurity in recent months. This has significantly curtailed the ability of local vaccinators to safely reach all children, and has led to a decrease in vaccination coverage and dramatic increase in the incidence of polio in 2006, with 29 cases reported – virtually all from the Southern Region - compared to just four cases during the same period in 2005.

To counter this trend, WHO and UNICEF today appealed to the Government of Afghanistan, military groups and anti-government elements, to agree on 'Days of Tranquility' during all upcoming polio vaccination campaigns in the troubled Southern Region. Such agreed days of solidarity among all Afghans and development partners would allow local vaccination teams to reach all populations, and save further children from a fate of life-long paralysis. Neutrality of essential public health interventions such as vaccination against polio must be respected by all parties to the conflict.

"Most of Afghanistan is today polio-free," said Dr David Heymann, WHO Representative for Polio Eradication, during an official visit to Kabul today. "But in the Southern Region, polio continues to paralyse children, and the reason is that they have not been vaccinated due to insecurity, as vaccinators cannot safely reach them. Agreed Days of Tranquillity in advance of and during the campaigns are urgently needed to allow all children living in areas of insecurity to be protected from this terrible disease."

In addition to appealing for Days of Tranquility, WHO and UNICEF also called on religious and community leaders to support polio eradication activities in the Southern Region and throughout Afghanistan. Religious and community leaders are uniquely placed to encourage parents to participate in polio campaigns, to allow every child under the age of five years to be immunized, in particular new-borns, young infants and children who may be sick with fever (or other illness). In addition, religious and community leaders can help counter any false rumours about vaccination. The polio vaccine being administered in Afghanistan is the same vaccine used throughout the world,

including other Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Indonesia.

Notes to editors:

The Global Polio Eradication Initiative is spearheaded by national governments, WHO, Rotary International, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and UNICEF. Afghanistan's polio eradication efforts are supported by such donors as Saudi Arabia, Oman, Canada, Japan, USAID, World Bank, Rotary International and others.

In Afghanistan in 2006, 29 polio cases have been reported (compared to 4 cases for the same period in 2005). 27 of the country's 29 cases are from the Southern Region. One case was reported from Rodat district of Nangarhar province in the eastern region, and one case was reported from Bakwa district of Farah province in the Western region of the country.

Afghanistan is one of only four remaining polio-endemic countries in the world, along with Nigeria, India and Pakistan. This is the lowest number of endemic countries in history. Since the launch of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative in 1988, the number of polio cases has been reduced by more than 99%; in 1988, more than 350,000 children were paralysed by polio in more than 125 countries.

Unless wild poliovirus circulation in Afghanistan is completely interrupted, polio will continue to cripple children not only in Afghanistan but also in polio-free neighboring or even distant polio-free countries. Increasingly, polio-free countries are taking extraordinary measures to protect themselves from polio re-infection, as universal immunization requirements for travelers from polio-affected areas are being recommended. Already, Saudi Arabia has recently extended its polio immunization requirements for the upcoming Hajj season. All travelers from the four remaining polio-endemic countries, including Afghanistan, who plan to visit Saudi Arabia for the upcoming Hajj pilgrimage, are advised to be immunized with oral polio vaccine (OPV) prior to departure for Saudi Arabia, irrespective of age and previous immunization status. Additionally, all travelers from these countries - irrespective of age and previous immunization status - will be required to receive an additional dose of OPV upon arrival in Saudi Arabia.

For further information, please contact:

WHO Afghanistan – Dr Tahir Mir, WHO Medical Officer on Polio Eradication, tel. +93 70 286803

UNICEF Afghanistan – Ms Savita Naqvi, Communication Officer, +93 79 850 7450

MoPH press contact – Dr Nafe, Polio Communication Officer, +93 70 587962

Oliver Rosenbauer, WHO Geneva, tel. +41 22 791 3832 (mobile tel. +41 79 500 6536),
rosenbauero@who.int