

Statement on stopping wild poliovirus transmission in Afghanistan and Pakistan

Tenth meeting of the Regional Subcommittee for Polio Eradication and Outbreaks 26 March 2024

Acknowledging the appointment of Dr Hanan Balkhy, the first female Regional Director for WHO's Eastern Mediterranean Region, and appreciating her full commitment to polio eradication in the Region;

Noting the progress achieved globally in eradicating wild poliovirus transmission since 1988, with endemic wild poliovirus transmission restricted to Afghanistan and Pakistan;

Acknowledging the finite time left to capitalize on these epidemiological gains to certify global eradication of wild poliovirus by 2026, in line with the Global Polio Eradication Strategy 2022–2026: Delivering on a Promise;

Noting that Afghanistan and Pakistan constitute one epidemiological bloc, necessitating coordinated polio eradication efforts due to shared transmission dynamics and cross-border population movements;

Appreciating the intensified polio eradication efforts made by Afghanistan and Pakistan throughout 2023, including focused efforts in the endemic East region of Afghanistan and north-western Pakistan;

Noting that in 2023, six cases were reported from each country, and in 2024, Afghanistan has reported one case of wild poliovirus from Kunar province and Pakistan has reported two cases, both from Balochistan province;

Appreciating the strong high-level political commitment demonstrated by the Government of Pakistan, despite political transitions in 2022 and 2023;

Recognizing that a new federal government and provincial governments have commenced their terms of office and brought renewed commitment to ending polio in Pakistan;

Concerned that, despite sustained efforts, wild poliovirus transmission continued in Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2023, with environmental detections outside the polio-endemic East region of Afghanistan and north-western Pakistan;

Further noting with concern the increase in cross-border poliovirus detections reported from Pakistan in 2023;

Giving consideration to the continued detection of wild poliovirus in both countries in 2024, which underscores the urgent need to prioritize action to interrupt the transmission of wild poliovirus through refocused efforts to reach all zero-dose and under-immunized children with oral polio vaccine, maintain community trust and enhance poliovirus surveillance;

Noting the remarkable efforts of health workers on the frontline in insecure settings, especially women, whose contributions are critical to the eradication effort;

Recognizing the sustained commitment by leaders at all levels, notably by political leaders and those of law enforcement and security agencies, community and religious leaders, civil society, Global Polio Eradication Initiative partners, especially Rotary International, parents, caregivers and all health workers;

Recognizing the longstanding commitment and historical financial support of partners such as Rotary International, and regional Member States to the eradication effort, including Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar; and in particular appreciating the dedication and support of the United Arab Emirates through the initiative of His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of UAE, to promote and support polio eradication in Pakistan through the UAE Pakistan Assistance Programme;

Recalling that the international spread of poliovirus constitutes a Public Health Emergency of International Concern under the International Health Regulations (2005);

We, Member States of the Regional Subcommittee for Polio Eradication and Outbreaks:

DECLARE THAT:

1. Interruption of wild poliovirus in Afghanistan and Pakistan is a regional public health priority;

COMMIT TO:

2. Mobilizing all necessary engagement and support by all political, community and civil society leaders and sectors across the Region, to fully achieve interruption of wild poliovirus transmission in the Region;
3. Fostering coordination with other public health efforts, to ensure closer integration, particularly with routine immunization efforts;

REQUEST:

4. The international donor and development community to continue supporting the national polio programmes in Afghanistan and Pakistan to facilitate implementation of their national emergency action plans to end polio;
5. The leadership at all levels in Afghanistan and Pakistan to intensify coordination and collaboration on all aspects of polio eradication and mitigate cross-border transmission of wild poliovirus through joint surveillance strengthening and synchronization of campaigns;
6. The Government of Pakistan to ensure its continued commitment to polio eradication and the Prime Minister to convene the National Task Force to meet regularly;
7. The leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan to ensure a safe and secure environment for health workers at the forefront of eradication efforts;
8. Effective operational delivery of polio vaccines to all children, particularly those who are unimmunized or under-immunized, through routine immunization and supplementary polio vaccination campaigns to ensure cessation of polio transmission;
9. The WHO Regional Director to fully support Afghanistan and Pakistan in their efforts to eradicate polio, including by advocating for all necessary financial and technical support, reviewing progress, planning corrective actions as necessary and regularly informing Member States of the aforementioned, and of any further action required, through the WHO Executive Board, World Health Assembly and WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean.