



## JOINT MEDIA RELEASE

### 1.2 MILLION CHILDREN TO BE REACHED IN AFGHAN POLIO IMMUNIZATION DRIVE

*Vaccination Campaign UN Peace Day 2009: "Polio is an issue of common interest"*

**Kabul 10 August 2009** – 1.2 million children in southern, south-eastern, western and eastern Afghanistan will be targeted by a new 3-day polio eradication drive, to be launched 13 September.

The immunization campaign comes shortly after the country's health authorities reported one new case of the polio virus in the West of the country. It is part of an ongoing effort to eradicate polio in Afghanistan - one of just four countries in the world still affected by the crippling disease.

At the occasion of UN Peace Day 2009 this special campaign aims to vaccinate children under five years old in selected districts. More than 15,000 health workers will travel from house to house in eight provinces – Ghor, Farah, Uruzgan, Helmand, Kandahar, Khost, Kunar and Nangarhar. As many families are unable to access health facilities in the rural parts of Afghanistan this mobile approach is essential in ensuring that every child in the target group is reached. In the South, vaccination activities are planned in 13 high risk, difficult to reach districts in Helmand, Kandahar and Uruzgan provinces targeting a total of 660,000 children. The campaign is synchronized with vaccination activities across the border in Pakistan. 1.4 million doses of monovalent oral polio vaccine are required for this latest campaign which is led by the Afghan Ministry of Public Health and supported by UNICEF and WHO.

Four rounds of nation-wide house to house vaccination campaign (NIDs), targeting almost 7.5 million children, have been implemented until August 2009. Two rounds of sub-national campaigns (SNIDs) were conducted for southern, south east and eastern regions to stop and prevent the virus from spreading to other parts of the country. "Peace is essential for access and herewith to reach all children with our polio immunization efforts." said the Minister of Public Health at the occasion of this years' Peace Day Campaign.

Circulation of wild polio virus continues, though limited to few districts. 31 cases have been reported in 2008 and 20 cases during 2009 as on August 31. Deteriorating security and the related environment of fear result in limited access of vaccination teams to children living in conflict-affected areas the South. As an average of 100,000 children can not be reached by either vaccination campaigns or routine immunization efforts vaccination coverage is persistently low in these zones. Lack of community awareness and participation, limited female service providers, inadequate health infrastructure and population movement from polio free areas to polio endemic areas and vice-versa further enhance the before-mentioned factors.

"Polio is an issue of common interest" declared Mr. Peter Graaff, WHO Representative in Afghanistan, appealing to local leaders to assist vaccination teams regardless of their tribal, ethnic, religious and political affiliation. "I strongly believe that community level partnership and ownership generate more demand for vaccination, support for the vaccination teams and a well deserved pride in ensuring a better health and future of the children in a village, district and indeed the entire country" he said. Our priority is to increase access to vaccinate children in security affected areas and also ensure safety of vaccination teams with the aim to completely interrupt the poliovirus circulation.

With 20 cases of polio reported in 2009, the Ministry of Public Health and its partners and major donors for the eradication of polio are redoubling efforts to ensure every child under the age of five receives polio vaccine. UNICEF Representative in Afghanistan Catherine Mbengue urges families in the eight provinces to look out for vaccination teams and make their children available to receive the vaccine. "Peace is necessary to access to all children and vaccinate them against polio." she said. "It takes just a few seconds to immunize a child – but the results last for a lifetime. Unless we eradicate polio in Afghanistan, the virus will continue to disable children, placing even greater strains upon families. Polio is not just a health issue – it has implications for the social and economic development of Afghanistan. Peace and polio constitute a vital cycle for the future of Afghanistan"

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