

7 December 2020, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia □ The Islamic Advisory Group for Polio Eradication (IAG) in its seventh annual meeting acknowledged the unprecedented challenges to polio eradication posed by the disruptions to health care delivery, including to routine immunization and polio vaccination campaigns, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The IAG noted with concern that children were becoming increasingly vulnerable to polio and other vaccine-preventable diseases and the risk of international spread of poliovirus was increasing.

This year's IAG meeting, held virtually, and organized by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), comes at a critical juncture as the persistence of polio virus transmission in Afghanistan and Pakistan raises global concern for the children of those countries and their right to be protected from the crippling disease of polio.

In a statement issued at the end of the meeting, IAG leaders commended the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI)'s 'call to action' and the commitment of national governments to repurpose polio eradication infrastructure and assets, including health workers, community mobilization networks, disease surveillance and information management systems, as well as the global polio laboratory network to support the COVID-19 response.

Noting that Afghanistan and Pakistan are now the only remaining countries globally with endemic wild poliovirus transmission, the IAG urged the governments of both countries to fast-track efforts to eradicate the menace of polio in its last reservoirs and called upon religious leaders and influential community leaders in the two countries to fully support ongoing polio eradication efforts and mobilize parents and caregivers to regularly vaccinate their children against polio and other vaccine-preventable diseases.

The IAG reaffirmed its commitment to the GPEI and praised its alignment with the OIC's Strategic Health Programme of Action and acknowledged their support to countries during the ongoing pandemic.

The IAG is an Islamic consortium that was established in 2013 between Al Azhar Al Sharif, the International Islamic Fiqh Academy, the OIC and the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), and includes other religious scholars and technical experts.

**Despite COVID-19, polio eradication remains IAG's priority**

His Eminence Sheikh Dr Saleh Bin Abdullah Bin Humaid, President of the International Islamic Fiqh Academy, noted that despite the painful impact of the COVID-19 pandemic across the world resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths and restraining many activities in our daily lives, that the crisis had raised people's awareness of health issues and preventive measures, strengthened their committed and compliance to the restrictions and made people more appreciative of God's gift of health and well-being.

"There is no doubt that implementation of initiatives in the Islamic world and elsewhere to eradicate poliomyelitis and improve mother and child health, among others, has been hindered by the COVID-19 pandemic, especially as a result of lockdowns and movements on restrictions; however, we are still hopeful that health awareness has increased among the public and people are now more convinced of the importance of immunization to prevent vaccine-preventable diseases, including polio, measles and rubella," His Eminence said.

In his opening remarks, H.E. Dr Yousef Al-Othaimen, Secretary General of the OIC, reiterated that, "While our Member States and people continue to battle the worst health emergency of our time, it is important not to lose sight of our main goal as IAG of ensuring the eradication of polio in the remaining endemic countries and promoting maternal, and child health, as well as addressing other areas of routine immunization. It is critical for us to protect our hard-won gains against polio and other diseases that afflict our vulnerable children. It is gratifying, therefore, to note that the IAG has been at the forefront of supporting the COVID-19 response since the beginning of the pandemic, as well as continuing their work to eradicate polio."

Representing His Eminence Dr Ahmed El-Tayyeb, the Grand Imam of Al Azhar Al Sharif, His Eminence Professor Dr Mohamed Abdelrahman Al-Dawini, Deputy of Al Azhar Al Sharif, condemned the voices which had questioned and doubted the validity of vaccination campaigns claiming that they contradicted religious teachings. These allegations, he reiterated, contradicted all valid fatwas agreed by Islamic scholars on the necessity of vaccination as a vital means of saving lives. Ironically, these false allegations were being made as vaccination campaigns were proving their success in stopping poliovirus in polio-affected countries.

His Eminence urged all parents to positively respond to the vaccination campaigns and vaccinate their sons and daughters in order to protect them from the evils of this crippling and incurable disease.

Representing His Excellency Dr Bandar Hajjar, President of the IsDB, Dr Mansur Mokhtar, Vice President of the IsDB, reiterated the Bank's commitment to continuing collaboration with all partners to support member countries achieve Sustainable Development Goal 3 "Ensure healthy lives and promote health and well-being for all at all ages". "The IsDB has continued its support as the main donor for polio eradication in Pakistan, with a total approved budget of US\$ 427 million from 2013 to 2020, and remains committed to the goals of the GPEI, OIC's Strategic Health Programme of Action and the IsDB's health sector policy," Dr Mukhtar said.

## **COVID-19 response demonstrates value of collaboration**

In his speech, Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, expressed his appreciation to the IAG leadership for their timely and valuable support for the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We need to learn from the COVID-19 response, which has demonstrated yet again the important role played by the IAG, religious scholars and faith-based organizations in dealing with global health emergencies. The COVID-19 response has shown the value of collaboration among countries and stakeholders in sharing information and technology to mitigate the global ramifications of this health crisis."

"We reaffirm our commitment to the eradication of polio from Afghanistan and Pakistan, in which wild poliovirus transmission continues due to the suspension of polio vaccination campaigns because of the COVID-19 pandemic. WHO also remains committed to mitigating the outbreaks of vaccine-derived polioviruses in some countries of the Eastern Mediterranean and African regions aggravated by the disruption to childhood preventable-disease vaccination campaigns during the pandemic," said Dr Al-Mandhari.

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