



11 August 2014 – Iraq has launched a polio immunization campaign aiming to protect over four million children under the age of 5 throughout the country against the crippling disease.

The four-day campaign, undertaken by the Ministry of Health with the support of WHO and UNICEF, is part of the national response to the re-emergence of the polio virus earlier this year which ended nearly 14 years of Iraq's polio-free status.

“This campaign comes at a critical time while the country is witnessing a huge internal exodus of children fleeing violence and turmoil,” said Marzio Babilie, UNICEF Iraq Representative. “This is a top priority for UNICEF. No child should be missed. No child should be paralysed.”

The campaign aims to reach children in conflict zones, displaced communities and host populations. The ongoing violence in the country has precipitated the internal displacement of nearly 1.2 million people since the beginning of the year. Almost 200 000 have been displaced only in the last three days alone. UNICEF estimates half of that number are children.

“As the violence spreads, children are being displaced up to three times with their families, often living in overcrowded conditions where they are at a much higher risk of contracting infectious diseases,” said Dr Syed Jaffar Hussain, WHO Representative in Iraq. “WHO is working with the national health authorities and partners to ensure that the health of all vulnerable populations, especially children, is protected against diseases like polio.”

With two cases of polio in Iraq and a relatively high number of unvaccinated children due to

difficulties in accessing families and children, especially in conflict zones and due to social reservations, Iraq has now become vulnerable to a wider outbreak of the crippling and incurable disease. WHO and UNICEF are helping health authorities reach children in 12 governorates, including the three governorates in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq where approximately 250 000 Iraqi children and 125 000 Syrian children have taken refuge.

“Iraq is one of seven countries included in a consolidated polio response plan by WHO and UNICEF that aims to reach 25 million children in the region with repeated doses of the vaccine. Everything possible must be done to reach all children and end polio forever,” said Chris Maher, WHO manager for polio eradication.

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Saturday 17th of May 2025 11:54:20 AM