

Erbil/Amman, 2 September 2014 – Despite the ongoing conflict, violence and displacement across Iraq, a mass polio immunization campaign succeeded in reaching 3.75 out of 4 million children under the age of 5.

The five-day campaign between 10 and 14 August was organized by the Iraqi Ministry of Health with the support of UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO), and was part of the national response to the re-emergence of the poliovirus in Iraq earlier this year. The campaign comes at a time when the number of displaced children continues to increase on a daily basis. Approximately 65 000 internally displaced children were vaccinated in the Kurdish Duhok governorate alone.

“This campaign represents a real success for children,” said UNICEF Iraq Representative Dr Marzio Babilie, “and this is thanks to the incredible commitment of the health teams who worked in very difficult circumstances. We commend each one of them.”

The campaign, which aimed to reach children in 14 Directorates of Health in 12 Iraqi governorates, was made particularly challenging by the internal displacement of nearly 1.8 million people since the beginning of the year, of whom half are estimated to be children. However, health authorities were able to use pre-positioned stocks of vaccine and other supplies to ensure a high number of children were reached.

“In a country going through one emergency after another, a successful polio immunization campaign spreads hope that humanitarian work can achieve its goals,” said Dr Syed Jaffar Hussain, WHO Iraq Representative.

The confirmation of two cases of polio in Iraq in February and April this year ended a 14-year period during which the country remained polio-free. With a relatively high number of unvaccinated children due to difficulties in accessing families and children, especially in slums and conflict zones, experts say Iraq has now become vulnerable to a wider outbreak of the crippling and incurable disease.

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