

PRESS RELEASE

Polio outbreak response under way to protect children in five highest-risk countries

Amman/ Cairo, 2 March 2014– Children in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Syria will be the first of nearly 10 million children across the Middle East to receive a dose of polio vaccine this month.

Mass vaccination campaigns were launched in the four countries today, to be followed by a similar campaign in Lebanon from 9 March.

"We need to get two drops of polio vaccine into the mouth of every child under the age of five, regardless of their previous immunization history, every time there is a campaign," said Khouzama al-Rasheed, a medical worker at a health centre in Qudssaya, rural Damascus, Syria. "If we can do that, the virus won't be able to find a single child to infect, and we can put a stop to this disease."

The multi-country vaccination campaign forms part of a regional response to the re-importation of wild poliovirus of Pakistani origin into Syria. Seven countries across the Middle East are planning to vaccinate more than 22 million children multiple times over six months – the region's largest-ever coordinated immunization plan.

"Polio doesn't respect borders," said Dr. Ala Alwan the World Health Organization's Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean. "The detection of polio in Syria is not Syria's problem alone, but one requiring a regional response. The safety of children across the Middle East relies on us being able to put a stop to polio in Syria."

On 28 October, 2013, the Syrian Ministry of Health announced that polio had returned to the country for the first time in almost 15 years. The March vaccination round will be Syria's fourth since polio was detected, and rounds in January and February reached all governorates.

"To vaccinate so many children in different countries is a huge undertaking," said Maria Calivis, UNICEF Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa. "Each country faces its own set of challenges in order to make the campaign effective – above all in Syria – but this is the only way we can ensure children across the region are properly protected against this terrible disease."

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