



Report of the tenth meeting of the Regional Subcommittee for Polio Eradication and Outbreaks

Opening of the meeting

1. The tenth meeting of the Regional Subcommittee for Polio Eradication and Outbreaks of the Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean was held by videoconference on 26 March 2024 (see Annex 1 for the programme of the meeting). The Subcommittee was established in response to resolution EM/RC67/R.4 (2020) and held its first meeting on 16 March 2021.
2. The meeting was attended by ministers of health or their representatives, key stakeholders of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI), including the Polio Oversight Board (POB), the UNICEF Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa, the UNICEF Regional Director for South Asia, and the WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean (see Annex 2 for the list of participants).
3. Dr Hanan Balkhy, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, opened the meeting by welcoming all and acknowledging the high levels of commitment of the members of the Regional Subcommittee towards polio eradication.
4. She reaffirmed her commitment to intensify efforts to eradicate polio during her tenure as Regional Director. Dr Balkhy highlighted that she has been heavily engaged in polio since taking office on 1 February 2024, including attending the POB meeting and actively planning visits to polio-affected countries in the Region in 2024, alongside the POB Chair and UNICEF Regional Directors.
5. The WHO Regional Director noted that since taking office she has also engaged with some Member States on the actions needed to end polio transmission in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and in northern Yemen and southern and central Somalia, whilst simultaneously ensuring regional efforts to end polio stay high on the global health agenda.
6. She reaffirmed that strengthening the Region's public health capacities to ensure Member States have the tools not only to end transmission of polio, but to ensure that polio can never make a comeback, remains a key priority.
7. Dr Balkhy acknowledged the remaining challenges to ending polio and said that this goal could only be reached through strong collaboration. She cited existing examples of regional solidarity, including for polio financing, support for disease surveillance and laboratory testing, and cross-border collaboration for immunization, case notification and other essential functions of the polio programme, as a testament to the collaboration that is required to move the Region towards interruption of poliovirus transmission and regional certification.

Remarks by the co-Chairs

8. H.E. Dr Hanan Al Kuwari, co-Chair of the Regional Subcommittee, and Minister of Public Health of Qatar, began her address to Member States by welcoming Dr Hanan Balkhy, noting that the Region will be well served by her renewed sense of urgency in the fight to end polio.
9. Dr Al Kuwari highlighted that the epidemiology at the start of the year presents both a picture of promise and peril. She noted the reduction of wild poliovirus to just one dominant cluster in circulation in Afghanistan

and Pakistan provides hope, but continued detections in both countries in 2024, including in two¹ paralysed children from Balochistan, confirm that the goal of interruption remains challenging.

10. She highlighted that environmental surveillance has continued to detect poliovirus in districts outside the endemic zones in Afghanistan and Pakistan, including in the historic reservoirs of Kandahar, Karachi, Peshawar and Quetta.

11. The co-Chair further stated that the outbreaks of variant polioviruses that persist in the Region, some emerging due to expanding conflict and insecurity, demand swift and decisive action.

12. Dr Al Kuwari called upon the authorities in Afghanistan and Pakistan to intensify efforts, with a focus on the quality and efficacy of vaccination campaigns. She noted that enhanced coverage and innovative campaign strategies are essential to achieving the shared vision of a polio-free world.

13. Addressing countries in the Region grappling with outbreaks, Dr Al Kuwari urged them to act swiftly and decisively. She stressed that every moment of delay represents a missed opportunity to protect the most vulnerable children in the Region.

14. Dr Al Kuwari assured Member States of her continued support in advocating for every child's right to a polio-free future. She called for Member States of the Region to stand united in their resolve, noting that in unity lies strength, and in perseverance lies victory.

15. Dr Hussain Al Rand, delivering remarks on behalf of H.E. Dr Abdul Rahman Mohammed Al Owais, co-Chair of the Regional Subcommittee and Minister of Health and Prevention of the United Arab Emirates, opened by congratulating Dr Balkhy on her appointment as Regional Director.

16. Noting this was the tenth meeting of the Subcommittee, Dr Al Rand recognized the seriousness with which Member States have taken polio eradication and urged them to collectively renew their commitment and redouble their efforts in the global fight against polio in 2024.

17. Citing the 10-year anniversary² of the regional certification of WHO's South-East Asia Region, Dr Al Rand noted that polio is now on the brink of global eradication thanks to many years of unwavering dedication of individuals, organizations and governments worldwide.

18. He reminded Member States that in 2023 six cases of wild poliovirus were reported from both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Dr Al Rand acknowledged the extraordinary efforts to interrupt transmission but noted that the news of two children paralysed in Pakistan in 2024 was a reminder that persistent challenges underscore the importance of maintaining vigilance.

19. Dr Al Rand emphasised the United Arab Emirates, under the leadership of His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, remains committed to ending polio in the Region. Recognizing that eradicating polio requires a comprehensive approach, encompassing vaccination campaigns, surveillance systems and community engagement initiatives, Dr Al Rand reaffirmed the United Arab Emirate's continued financial support for polio eradication efforts in the Region to enable and foster innovative approaches to the remaining challenges.

20. He concluded by urging Member States to continue to work together across borders and sectors, in partnership, until the job is done.

Overview of the regional polio situation and risks to Member States

21. Dr Hamid Syed Jafari, Director, Polio Eradication, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, provided an overview of the polio situation across the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region. He outlined that

¹ At the time of writing of this report, a further wild poliovirus case had been confirmed in Kunar province, Afghanistan, from January 2024.

² WHO's South-East Asia Region was certified polio-free on 27 March 2014.

while transmission of wild poliovirus type 1 (WPV1) has persisted in Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2023 and early 2024, there has been a significant decline in the number of genetic clusters, from 12 in 2020 to just two in 2024.

22. Dr Jafari explained that YB3C, one of the two remaining clusters that is considered endemic to Pakistan's southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, has not been detected in a poliovirus case since September 2023 and in an environmental sample since November 2023, whereas there has been an expansion of the YB3A cluster, which is endemic to the East Region of Afghanistan, within both Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2023. Importantly, Dr Jafari noted that the majority of detections of YB3A in both countries had been in environmental samples.

23. Dr Jafari highlighted that the paucity in detections of YB3C indicates that it appears near elimination, but cautioned that repeated introductions of YB3A in the historic reservoirs caused great concern. He noted that both country programmes are responding vigorously to ensure transmission is not reestablished.

24. Dr Jafari added that the sensitivity of Afghanistan and Pakistan's surveillance networks is exceptional and has not been seen in other locations, with the exception of Egypt. This surveillance network, he noted, is important in detecting poliovirus wherever it emerges, including from moving populations and travellers across both countries.

25. Dr Jafari informed Member States of a recent incident, which he noted had been resolved, whereby the authorities in Afghanistan had suspended the transport of acute flaccid paralysis (AFP) and environmental specimens from Afghanistan to the Regional Reference Laboratory in Pakistan for around seven weeks at the beginning of 2024. Dr Jafari thanked the Regional Subcommittee for their advice and support in resolving this crisis and requested Member States and polio partners' bilateral engagement with the authorities in Afghanistan to ensure polio eradication activities are not interrupted given the risks to all Member States of the Region.

26. Dr Jafari noted with concern the uncontrolled transmission of circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2 (cVDPV2) in the northern governorates of Yemen, but noted that planning is underway with the authorities in the north of Yemen for the delivery of integrated health services and immunization through a new initiative called Health Emergency Essential Response (HEER). He said that the HEER initiative needed support to establish a robust coordination mechanism to bring partners and donors together, mobilize resources and enable accountability for implementation of integrated service delivery. Dr Jafari expressed his appreciation for the upcoming joint mission of the WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean and the UNICEF Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa to Yemen to consolidate the HEER initiative.

27. Dr Jafari emphasized the progress being made in Somalia against the longstanding outbreak of cVDPV2. He reiterated that access remains a challenge in a number of areas in South Central Somalia but recognized the important step the country has taken with the use of novel oral poliovirus vaccine type 2 (nOPV2) in 2023. Dr Jafari was encouraged by the establishment of the National Task Force on Polio Eradication and Immunization, chaired by the Prime Minister, noting the forum would aid efforts to reach children in areas where they had been previously missed by vaccination.

28. Dr Jafari detailed the impact of the conflict in Sudan on polio eradication efforts, noting the country has responded to multiple outbreaks of cVDPV2 since 2020. He observed that although surveillance is compromised due to the conflict, Sudan is going to extraordinary lengths to sustain its surveillance function, which is evident in each new detection. Dr Jafari appreciated Sudan's readiness to use nOPV2 in its next vaccination response and its strong national commitment.

29. Dr Jafari also expressed his appreciation for Egypt's strong response to an emergence of cVDPV2 related to use of nOPV2 in North Sinai in August 2023. He reiterated that no detection of this strain of virus has been recorded since October 2023, but highlighted that given the geographic proximity to the Gaza Strip, this remained a risk for the Region.

30. Dr Jafari highlighted that surveillance in some Member States in the Region needs to be further strengthened to ensure timely detection and rapid response of any importation, given the risk of regional spread.
31. Dr Jafari requested Member States endorse the proposed statements in support of continued eradication efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan and in Somalia and Yemen.
32. Dr Jafari additionally requested Member States' support for the HEER initiative in northern Yemen, noting that additional support will be required to foster partnerships, engage donors for resources and provide implementation oversight for its success.
33. He encouraged Member States to renew their engagement with the new Government of Pakistan and the authorities in Afghanistan to ensure commitment to finishing the job and maintaining eradication activities in 2024.
34. Finally, Dr Jafari urged all Member States and stakeholders to maintain vigilance to detect and rapidly respond to any polio outbreak.
35. WHO Regional Director, Dr Hanan Balkhy requested the agreement of Member States on the two statements of the Regional Subcommittee (see Annexes 3 and 4).
36. It was noted that Dr Nada Ghosn, Ministry of Health, Lebanon, requested an addition be made to one of the statements, to include language regarding the vigilance of all Member States for the detection of vaccine-derived polioviruses.

Remarks from ministers of health

37. Dr Hani Mousa Badir delivered remarks on behalf of H.E. Dr Salih Al Hasnawi, Minister of Health for Iraq. He congratulated Dr Hanan Balkhy on her appointment as WHO Regional Director, and thanked WHO and the Subcommittee for the support provided to countries in the Region as they push to finally interrupt poliovirus transmission. He acknowledged that polio remains a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) and urged Member States to prioritize finding solutions to the remaining challenges. Dr Badir noted with concern the increasing number of unimmunized children and health systems that are unable to adapt to meet the needs of communities. He emphasized that some communities remain unconvinced of the effectiveness of immunization programmes and urged Members to foster the Immunization Agenda 2030 and the health-related Sustainable Development Goals to protect vulnerable communities. Dr Badir described recent progress made towards polio eradication in Iraq, including digitalizing health information platforms to reduce the number of unimmunized children, preparedness for use of nOPV2, increasing the sensitivity of the surveillance system for detection and reporting of AFP, expanding capacity at the national polio laboratory and enhancing disease surveillance in high-risk districts. He finally noted that Iraq is the first country in the Region to have integrated polio programme capacities into overall public health functions.
38. H.E. Dr Ali Haji Adam, Minister of Health of Somalia, addressed Somalia's long running outbreak of cVDPV2 in his remarks to Member States. He noted that an estimated 1.2 million children remain un- or under-immunized in Somalia, putting them at serious risk of vaccine-preventable diseases such as polio, measles and diphtheria. The Minister of Health further described the security challenges that render parts of the country inaccessible to vaccination teams, entrenching the vulnerability of some children in the country. He reiterated Somalia's commitment to ending the outbreak and described the vaccination response being implemented under the Somalia Emergency Action Plan for polio that includes five mass immunization campaigns in 2024. He further noted specific efforts to improve the quality of vaccination, strengthen surveillance and enhance coordination with neighbouring countries. He expressed heartfelt thanks to the GPEI for their unwavering support, noting that the recent visit to Somalia of the POB Chair underscores the need for collective efforts in tackling polio. He finally reiterated the Government of Somalia's full commitment, referencing the establishment of the National Task Force on Polio Eradication and Immunization to be chaired by the Prime Minister, H.E. Mr Hamza Abdi Barre.

39. Representing H.E. Mr Fahad bin Abdurrahman Al-Jalajel, the Minister of Health of Saudi Arabia, Dr Rakan Khalid Bin Dohaish congratulated the WHO Regional Director on her appointment and thanked the co-Chairs for their work on the Subcommittee. He noted with concern the risk to global eradication efforts if just one child is paralysed by polio and reaffirmed the support of Saudi Arabia to finish the job. He acknowledged the importance of surveillance and containment following the interruption of poliovirus transmission and confirmed Saudi Arabia's support for the two statements being issued at the conclusion of the meeting.

Update on the polio situation and response in Pakistan

40. Mr Iftikhar Ali Shalwani presented on behalf of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Health, H. E. Mr Shehbaz Sharif. He detailed recent progress in Pakistan, citing the reduction in diversity of circulating polioviruses, from 12 genetic clusters in 2019 to just two in 2024, as evidence of being in the last stages of eradication. Mr Shalwani noted that one of the two remaining genetic clusters, YB3C, has not been detected outside of the endemic southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region since January 2023, with no detection since November 2023 in the endemic zone, but noted with concern a dramatic increase in detections of the YB3A cluster, highlighting the constant risk of the virus's movement with people, particularly across the border with Afghanistan. He described the robust response Pakistan has mounted to virus detection anywhere in the country, and the close coordination and collaboration with the Afghanistan polio programme to ensure synchronized vaccination campaigns, joint communication activities and all-age vaccination at border crossings. Mr Shalwani highlighted that neither Afghanistan or Pakistan can achieve polio eradication without the other and reassured the Subcommittee of Pakistan's continued collaboration to reach the end goal. He reiterated the Government of Pakistan's commitment to addressing the remaining challenges through intensified vaccination rounds, strengthened routine immunization, community engagement activities and integrated health service delivery. He recognized the hard work of the dedicated frontline workers, most of whom are women, noting that Pakistan owes their success to date to them. He thanked the WHO Regional Director and Member States for their support and collaboration and closed by reiterating the need for reinvigorated cooperation, proposing a regional health dialogue focused on Afghanistan and Pakistan, convened with support from the Subcommittee co-Chairs.

Comments by POB members and the UNICEF Regional Directors for the Middle East and North Africa and South Asia

41. Mr Mike McGovern, member of the POB and Chair of the International Polio Plus Committee of Rotary International, congratulated Dr Balkhy on her appointment as WHO Regional Director. He reiterated that Rotary International maintains the highest level of commitment to supporting Member States in the Eastern Mediterranean Region to end polio and acknowledged the ongoing support of Rotarians around the world who raise money in support of polio eradication. Mr McGovern reflected on the urgency noted by the Minister of Health of Qatar and co-Chair of the Subcommittee, reaffirming that collective action will serve the Region well as it moves closer to eradication. He noted the renewed commitment of the GPEI's largest sovereign donor, the United States of America, for US\$ 265 million, as an example of global cooperation to finish the job. Mr McGovern expressed his gratitude to the frontline workers carrying out the work of vaccination. He concluded by expressing Rotary's thanks for the urgency and cooperation with which eradication efforts are carried out in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

42. Dr John Vertefeuille, from the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), delivered remarks on behalf of CDC Director Dr Mandy Cohen. He appreciated the Subcommittee and ministers of health from the Region for their continued focus on polio eradication. He reiterated CDC's steadfast commitment to stopping polio transmission and urged Member States to capitalize on the moment, increase efforts in detection and outbreak response, and seek out interlocutors in communities with endemic transmission in Afghanistan and Pakistan to find new ways to reach communities. Dr Vertefeuille reiterated CDC's thanks to each country in the Region for their efforts to bring about a polio-free world and encouraged Member States to support their neighbours to "cross the finishing line" for polio eradication.

43. Ms Adele Khodr, UNICEF Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa, renewed UNICEF's commitment to the shared goal of polio eradication and praised the efforts of governments across the Middle

East and North Africa region. She noted the importance of following through on the zero-dose agenda, prioritizing underserved communities and closing immunity gaps. She called for regionally coordinated and multilevel advocacy in Yemen for integrated outbreak responses, as well as intensive community engagement to generate demand for immunization. She highlighted the urgency of committing resources to supporting countries in implementing timely, high-quality and appropriately-scoped outbreak responses, and intensifying routine immunization in high-risk countries to ensure that every child is vaccinated, including those in nomadic, pastoral, refugee and migrant communities.

44. Dr Chris Elias, Chair of the POB and President of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, apologized for not being able to join the Subcommittee meeting live in a pre-recorded video message. He reaffirmed that the Foundation remained committed to supporting the Region to eradicate polio. He acknowledged the drive and deep commitment of the Subcommittee members in the Region, but noted with concern the challenges that remain, including donor confidence in the programme to finish the job. Dr Elias noted that gaps in immunization coverage in both countries had left hundreds of thousands of children vulnerable to contracting polio. He urged Member States to double down on political will and make good use of the tools and resources available to continue the fight to end polio and ensure that no child is missed.

45. Dr Aurelia Nguyen, Chief Programme Officer, Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, delivered remarks by video on behalf of Gavi's new Chief Executive Officer, Dr Sania Nishtar. She expressed sorrow for the families of the two children paralysed by polio in Balochistan province to date in 2024. Citing the detections of WPV1 this year, Dr Nguyen underscored the importance and urgency of the work of the Subcommittee. She encouraged partners to strengthen their resolve and paid tribute to the leadership, partnership and commitment that has taken Member States to the brink of polio eradication. Dr Nguyen also praised the effort of the teams working on the ground to end polio in very challenging circumstances.

46. Mr Sanjay Wijesekera, UNICEF Regional Director for South Asia, who delivered his intervention via a prerecorded video, congratulated Dr Hanan Balkhy on her new leadership position. He reiterated UNICEF's commitment to finally end polio in Afghanistan and Pakistan, noting that the children of these countries had waited too long and paid too high a price. He reaffirmed that UNICEF's representatives were working hard to make sure that there are enough vaccines to immunize children and that informed communities were empowered to protect their children. Mr Wijesekera noted that he was looking forward to a joint visit to both Afghanistan and Pakistan in April with the WHO Regional Director. He ended his address by thanking all partners of the global effort to eradicate polio, expressing his belief that polio eradication should not be the limit of our ambition, but the gateway to better health and social services for vulnerable communities.

47. Mr Aidan O'Leary, Director, Polio Eradication, WHO headquarters, expressed his appreciation for the high level of political commitment across the Region and thanked Member States for their dedication to the Subcommittee. He acknowledged the extraordinary efforts underway in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen to reach and vaccinate every child. Mr O'Leary highlighted the efforts to synchronize vaccination activities between the remaining two polio-endemic countries, which represent one single epidemiological bloc, noting that between January and June 2024, 175 million vaccinations are planned. He detailed efforts to improve access in Somalia, Sudan and Yemen and the importance of programmatic innovations to close gaps. He acknowledged the interventions from Iraq and Lebanon earlier in the meeting, reiterating the importance of maintaining robust surveillance systems that enable the rapid detection of any poliovirus. He underlined that efforts to strengthen essential immunization across the Region are critical, particularly in improving first dose of inactivated polio vaccine (IPV1) coverage. Mr O'Leary urged Member States to maintain political will and a sense of urgency, including for full implementation of the temporary recommendations of the Emergency Committee under the International Health Regulations (2005) on the international spread of poliovirus.

Recognition of Member State contributions to polio eradication

48. Dr Balkhy recognised Somalia's recent concerted efforts to improve campaign quality, accountability and campaign monitoring under the Somalia Emergency Action Plan for Polio.

49. Dr Balkhy commended Somalia's use of the novel oral polio vaccine (nOPV) for outbreak response, noting that it was the third country in the Eastern Mediterranean Region to employ the newly prequalified vaccine.

50. Dr Balkhy also appreciated the steps taken to reduce the number of missed children, in particular the recent systematic mapping of inaccessible populations, as well as Somalia's approach to co-administer vitamin A, albendazole and measles vaccines alongside polio vaccine.

51. Dr Balkhy praised the strong political commitment, particularly by the Minister of Health, and the Prime Minister, who has notified that he will chair the Somalia Immunization and Polio Eradication Task Force, following a high-level visit from the POB Chair, Dr Chris Elias.

52. Dr Balkhy stated that with such strong political oversight and focused programmatic interventions, she believed Somalia is well-positioned to build on the progress to stop the longest-running outbreak of cVDPV2 in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

Summary of proposed actions

53. Dr Jafari acknowledged the leadership and support of the co-Chairs, and appreciated the commitment of the broad public health leadership from across the Region in the effort to end polio.

54. He summarized the proposed actions and areas for Member State support across four areas. He requested Member States to endorse the two statements on stopping transmission of WPV1 in Afghanistan and Pakistan and stopping cVDPV2 outbreaks in Somalia and Yemen. He acknowledged comments had already been received from Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates. Following the meeting and consolidation of all comments, the two statements would be issued by the close of business on Thursday 21 March 2024.

55. Dr Jafari requested Member States' oversight of and support for the HEER initiative in northern Yemen, noting that this was an opportunity to deliver integrated health services, including immunization. He noted that the Subcommittee Secretariat would continue to follow up with Member States.

56. Dr Jafari urged Member States to bilaterally engage with the authorities in Afghanistan to maintain the prioritization of polio eradication efforts, and to reiterate that it remains a PHEIC. He further encouraged Member States to remind the Afghan authorities of the support available and that interruptions to programme implementation would have a negative impact on eradication efforts.

57. Dr Jafari acknowledged the proposal by Pakistan for a health dialogue to be convened between Afghanistan and Pakistan, with the participation of other supportive Member States, and reiterated that this would be explored further.

58. The Polio Director finally recognized the comments from Member States regarding the risks that remain until all polio transmission has been stopped and reaffirmed the need to prioritize the strengthening of surveillance, routine immunization and preparedness to rapidly respond to any detection of poliovirus with robust vaccination campaigns.

Closing remarks

59. Dr Balkhy closed the meeting by saying she was deeply moved by the collective dedication and experience present at her inaugural meeting of the Subcommittee. She thanked the two co-Chairs, dignitaries and partners, including POB members and GPEI partners, donors and other stakeholders for inspiring immense hope in polio's dying days.

60. Dr Balkhy echoed the messages from partners, adding that although we were close to a world free from the scourge of polio, navigating the remaining complexities of reaching every child across the Region would take unyielding resolve. She encouraged Member States and partners to remain steadfast in their commitment, lean on each other's strengths, foster collaboration and innovate boldly in 2024.

Annexes

Annex 1. Programme

Tenth meeting of the Regional Subcommittee for Polio Eradication and Outbreaks

Virtual meeting, 26 March 2024, 11.00–12.30 (Cairo time/EET)

Timing	Event	Presenter/speaker
11:00–11:12	Welcome and opening remarks	Dr Hanan Balkhy, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean H.E. Dr Hanan Al-Kuwari, Minister of Public Health, Qatar, and Regional Subcommittee co-Chair Dr Hussain Al Rand on behalf of H.E. Abdul Rahman Mohammed Al Oweis, Minister of Health and Prevention of the United Arab Emirates, and Regional Subcommittee co-Chair
11:12–11:22	Regional update on polio eradication	Dr Hamid Jafari, Director, Polio Eradication, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean
11:22–11:45	Discussion	Discussion
11:45–11:55	Update on polio situation and response in Pakistan	Mr Iftikhar Ali Shalwani, Federal Health Secretary, National Health Services Regulations and Coordination, Pakistan
11:55–12:10	Comments by POB members and UNICEF Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa and UNICEF Regional Director for South Asia	Live comments followed by remarks sent by video Mr Michael McGovern, Chair, International PolioPlus Committee, Rotary International Dr John Vertefeuille, US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, on behalf of Dr Mandy Cohen, Director Ms Adele Khodr, UNICEF Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa Dr Chris Elias, President, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Polio Oversight Board Chair Dr Aurelia Nguyen, Chief Programme Officer, Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, on behalf of Dr Sania Nishtar, CEO Mr Sanjay Wijesekera, UNICEF Regional Director for South Asia
12:10–12:20	Discussion	Discussion
12:20–12:25	Recognition of Member States' contribution to polio eradication	Dr Hanan Balkhy
12:25–12:30	Summary of proposed actions Closing comments by the WHO Regional Director	Dr Hamid Jafari Dr Hanan Balkhy

Annex 2. List of participants

Name	Position
Member States	
Dr Hani Mousa Badir	Acting Deputy Minister of Health for Technical Affairs, Ministry of Health, Iraq
Dr Nada Ghosn	Head, Epidemiological Surveillance Program, Ministry of Public Health, Lebanon
Dr Amal Al-Maani	Director General for Diseases Surveillance and Control, Ministry of Health, Oman
Mr. Iftikhar Ali Shalwani	Federal Health Secretary, National Health Services Regulations and Coordination, Pakistan
H.E. Dr Hanan Mohamed Al Kuwari	Minister of Public Health, Qatar
H.E. Dr Ali Haji Adam	Minister of Health and Human Services, Federal Government of Somalia
Dr Rakan Khalid Bin Dohaish	Assistant Deputy Minister of International Collaboration, Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia
Dr. Chekib Zedini	Director of Primary Healthcare, Ministry of Health, Tunisia
Dr Hussain Al Rand	Ministry of Health, United Arab Emirates
GPEI Partners	
Dr Chris Elias	President, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Polio Oversight Board Chair
Mr Michael McGovern	International Polio Plus Committee Chair, Rotary International
Dr John Vertefeuille	US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Ms Aurelia Nguyen	Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance
Mr Sanjay Wijesekera	Regional Director, UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia
Ms Adele Khodr	Regional Director, UNICEF Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa
Mr Aidan O'Leary	Director, Polio Eradication, WHO headquarters
Ms Sheeba Afghani	UNICEF Headquarters, Polio
WHO Secretariat	
Dr Hanan Balkhy	Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean
Dr Hamid Syed Jafari	Director, Polio Eradication, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean
Ms Emma Harte	Communication Consultant, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean
Ms Rimsha Qureshi	Communication Team Lead, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean
Ms Samah Abdel Aziz	Governing Bodies Officer, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean
Ms Namita Mediratta	Communications Consultant, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean
Dr Rana Ahmad Hajjeh	Director, Programme Management, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean
Dr Richard Brennan	Director, Health Emergencies, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

Annex 3. Statement on stopping wild poliovirus transmission in Afghanistan and Pakistan

Tenth meeting of the Regional Subcommittee for Polio Eradication and Outbreaks

26 March 2024 – Acknowledging the appointment of Dr Hanan Balkhy, the first female Regional Director for WHO's Eastern Mediterranean Region, and appreciating her full commitment to polio eradication in the Region;

Noting the progress achieved globally in eradicating wild poliovirus transmission since 1988, with endemic wild poliovirus transmission restricted to Afghanistan and Pakistan;

Acknowledging the finite time left to capitalize on these epidemiological gains to certify global eradication of wild poliovirus by 2026, in line with the Global Polio Eradication Strategy 2022–2026: Delivering on a Promise;

Noting that Afghanistan and Pakistan constitute one epidemiological bloc, necessitating coordinated polio eradication efforts due to shared transmission dynamics and cross-border population movements;

Appreciating the intensified polio eradication efforts made by Afghanistan and Pakistan throughout 2023, including focused efforts in the endemic East Region of Afghanistan and north-western Pakistan;

Noting that in 2023, six cases were reported from each country, and in 2024, Afghanistan has reported one case of wild poliovirus from Kunar province and Pakistan has reported two cases, both from Balochistan province;

Appreciating the strong high-level political commitment demonstrated by the Government of Pakistan, despite political transitions in 2022 and 2023;

Recognizing that a new federal government and provincial governments have commenced their terms of office and brought renewed commitment to ending polio in Pakistan;

Concerned that, despite sustained efforts, wild poliovirus transmission continued in Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2023, with environmental detections outside the polio-endemic East Region of Afghanistan and north-western Pakistan;

Further noting with concern the increase in cross-border poliovirus detections reported from Pakistan in 2023;

Giving consideration to the continued detection of wild poliovirus in both countries in 2024, which underscores the urgent need to prioritize action to interrupt the transmission of wild poliovirus through refocused efforts to reach all zero-dose and under-immunized children with oral polio vaccine, maintain community trust and enhance poliovirus surveillance;

Noting the remarkable efforts of health workers on the frontline in insecure settings, especially women, whose contributions are critical to the eradication effort;

Recognizing the sustained commitment by leaders at all levels, notably by political leaders and those of law enforcement and security agencies, community and religious leaders, civil society, Global Polio Eradication Initiative partners, especially Rotary International, parents, caregivers and all health workers;

Recognizing the longstanding commitment and historical financial support for the eradication effort by partners, such as Rotary International, and regional Member States, including Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and in particular appreciating the dedication and support of the United Arab Emirates through the initiative of His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the United Arab Emirates, to promote and support polio eradication in Pakistan through the UAE Pakistan Assistance Program;

Recalling that the international spread of poliovirus constitutes a Public Health Emergency of International Concern under the International Health Regulations (2005);

We, Member States of the Regional Subcommittee for Polio Eradication and Outbreaks:

DECLARE THAT:

1. Interruption of wild poliovirus in Afghanistan and Pakistan is a regional public health priority;

COMMIT TO:

2. Mobilizing all necessary engagement and support by all political, community and civil society leaders and sectors across the Region, to fully achieve interruption of wild poliovirus transmission in the Region;
3. Fostering coordination with other public health efforts, to ensure closer integration, particularly with routine immunization efforts;

REQUEST:

4. The international donor and development community to continue supporting the national polio programmes in Afghanistan and Pakistan to facilitate implementation of their national emergency action plans to end polio;
5. The leadership at all levels in Afghanistan and Pakistan to intensify coordination and collaboration on all aspects of polio eradication and mitigate cross-border transmission of wild poliovirus through joint surveillance strengthening and synchronization of campaigns;
6. The Government of Pakistan to ensure its continued commitment to polio eradication and the Prime Minister to convene the National Task Force to meet regularly;
7. The leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan to ensure a safe and secure environment for health workers at the forefront of eradication efforts;
8. Effective operational delivery of polio vaccines to all children, particularly those who are unimmunized or under-immunized, through routine immunization and supplementary polio vaccination campaigns to ensure cessation of polio transmission;
9. The WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean to fully support Afghanistan and Pakistan in their efforts to eradicate polio, including by advocating for all necessary financial and technical support, reviewing progress, planning corrective actions as necessary and regularly informing Member States of the aforementioned, and of any further action required, through the WHO Executive Board, World Health Assembly and WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean.

Annex 4. Statement on stopping the outbreak of vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2 in Yemen's northern governorates and in Somalia

Tenth meeting of the Regional Subcommittee on Polio Eradication and Outbreaks

26 March 2024 – Acknowledging the appointment of Dr Hanan Balkhy, the first female Regional Director for WHO's Eastern Mediterranean Region, and noting her full commitment to polio eradication;

Noting the progress achieved globally in eradicating poliovirus transmission since 1988;

Noting the extension made to the timeline of the Global Polio Eradication Strategy 2022–2026: Delivering on a Promise for certification of circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2 (cVDPV2) to 2028;

Noting with deep concern the challenges involved in stopping ongoing outbreaks of cVDPV2 in the Region without full access to vaccinate all vulnerable children in the affected populations due to conflict, climate change and insurgency;

Appreciating the Prime Minister of Somalia's decision to establish a national task force on immunization and polio and his commitment to polio eradication as Chair of the task force;

Acknowledging the focused efforts made as part of the Somalia emergency action plan for polio to improve campaign quality, including systematically identifying pockets of missed populations, improving monitoring by engaging third-party monitors and streamlining efforts for accessing missed populations;

Noting with concern the prolonged outbreak of cVDPV2 in Yemen that was first detected in late 2021 and to date has paralysed 237 children, 208 (87%) of whom are in the country's northern governorates;

Observing with alarm the persistent restrictions over the last three years on implementing outbreak response vaccination and the spread of misinformation and disinformation in the northern governorates of Yemen;

Noting that one in four Yemeni children have not received all the vaccinations recommended in the national routine immunization schedule, 17% of whom are zero-dose children, meaning they have not received a single vaccination;

Alarmed by recent evidence of the international spread of cVDPV2 in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, which highlights how easily poliovirus moves with and affects vulnerable populations, particularly in fragile settings where access to health services, including supplementary immunization, is extremely challenging;

Recalling that the international spread of polio is a Public Health Emergency of International Concern under the International Health Regulations (2005);

Recognizing the continued threat to all children posed by vaccine-derived poliovirus and the importance of regional solidarity and support to deliver on the goals of the 2022–2026 Polio Eradication Strategy, which have been endorsed and supported by a wide range of committed donors, such as Rotary International and Member States of the Region, in particular the United Arab Emirates through the sustained commitment of His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the United Arab Emirates;

We, the Member States of the Regional Subcommittee on Polio Eradication and Outbreaks:

DECLARE THAT:

1. The ongoing circulation of any strain of poliovirus in the Region is a regional public health emergency;

COMMIT TO:

2. Mobilizing all needed engagement and support by political, community and civil society leaders and sectors at all levels to successfully end polio as a regional public health emergency;
3. Intensifying domestic efforts to increase routine immunization coverage and strengthening national and international surveillance, regional cooperation and cross-border coordination to enhance surveillance for prompt detection of poliovirus, wherever it emerges in the Region;
4. Focusing efforts on reaching the remaining zero-dose children in the consequential geographies of the northern governorates of Yemen and southern and central Somalia, working within the broader humanitarian emergency response context;

REQUEST:

5. The international humanitarian and development communities to scale up their support for the provision of essential services, including a robust vaccination response to the polio outbreaks in Somalia and Yemen using modalities that will deliver an effective level of coverage;
6. The authorities and polio eradication partners in Somalia to build on the progress of the Somalia Polio Eradication Action Plan (SEAP) II and support the implementation of SEAP III to stop the longest-running outbreak in the country and prevent the further spread of cVDPV2 by the end of 2024;
7. The national authorities and the regional polio eradication programme to strengthen regional and cross-border coordination between Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Yemen, given the high risk of further instances of cVDPV2 crossing international borders;
8. The authorities in the northern governorates of Yemen, and health and humanitarian partners, to urgently implement integrated health services campaigns that include all essential services, including routine immunization and vaccination with novel type 2 oral polio vaccine (nOPV2);
9. The authorities in the northern governorates of Yemen, all immunization partners and the humanitarian development community to respond urgently to the unmitigated vaccine-related misinformation and disinformation campaign risking the lives of thousands of children in Yemen and across the Region;
10. The national authorities in all countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region to strengthen capacities for early detection of all polioviruses, including vaccine-derived poliovirus, and prepare for rapid, high-quality response.
11. The WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean to fully support efforts for the cessation of polio outbreaks in Somalia and Yemen, including by advocating for all necessary financial and technical support, reviewing progress, implementing corrective actions as necessary and regularly informing Member States of the aforementioned, and of any further action required, through the WHO Executive Board, the World Health Assembly and the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean.