

Abu Dhabi, 29 March 2018 -- Afghanistan and Pakistan polio eradication teams are gathering this week in Abu Dhabi to discuss common strategies for the last push required to eradicate polio in the Region.

In 2017, Afghanistan and Pakistan were the only two countries globally to record any cases of wild poliovirus transmission, with most cases occurring across two shared corridors in the north and south of both countries: Afghanistan reported 14 cases and Pakistan 8. In 2018, all reported cases of wild poliovirus have been recorded in Afghanistan.

In his opening remarks, Afghanistan Emergency Operations Centre Director Dr Maiwand Ahmadzai emphasized the importance of the historical opportunity at hand. “We are at a very critical junction in polio eradication. In the third month of 2018, we should have stopped transmission of polio, but we are still reporting cases,” he stated.

He reminded the participants of the risk that even small pockets of unvaccinated populations posed. “The recent cases in Kandahar (in Afghanistan’s south) are clear examples”.

The Pakistan National EOC Coordinator, Dr Rana Muhammad Safdar, told the country teams that many of the challenges faced in both countries were shared and reminded the meeting of the importance of preparing for and responding to any significant population movements across the border. “The anticipated returnee populations are a risk, and we need a joint plan on how to tackle this challenge.” Cooperation is key, he reminded.

Polio Programme Manager for WHO’s Eastern Mediterranean Region, Mr Chris Maher, underlined the importance of identifying and understanding the populations carrying the virus back and forth across the border. He said that the evidence pointed to active transmission across two points along the Afghanistan and Pakistan border: the so-called Northern and Southern corridors. “We know the two main transmission corridors are still active. We know people carrying the virus are moving extensively along the corridors.”

The focus of the meeting is to follow up on operationalization of joint action plans for the northern and southern transmission corridors in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Plans include

synchronized immunization activities, ensuring adequate disease surveillance, border vaccination plans and determining how best to identify, communicate with and vaccinate mobile populations in order to rapidly raise childhood immunity and stop transmission of polio in the region.

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