

Kabul, 18 January 2021 – The Ministry of Public Health of Afghanistan, in collaboration with UNICEF and WHO, will begin the first national polio immunization campaign of 2021 today. The 5-day campaign will aim to vaccinate over 9.9 million children under the age of 5 across the country.

As efforts to eradicate polio are intensified, declining immunity against polio in populations in certain areas of the country continues to be one of the biggest challenges. A key reason for this has been either the complete lack of access or extreme difficulty in reaching certain areas with regular routine or supplementary polio vaccination for extended periods of time.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further fuelled a significant decline in immunity rates due to a

6-month pause in vaccinations between February and July 2020. This has contributed towards a rise in the number of cases and has exacerbated existing disruptions to critical immunizations caused by active conflict and bans on polio campaigns.

To date, there are no new cases reported in 2021. And the total number of wild polio cases remains at 56 in 2020. The polio programme remains committed to finishing the job and has demonstrated its ability to adapt and rise to any challenge by safely delivering polio immunization campaigns in 2020 despite the ongoing COVID-19 epidemic. As the national immunization campaign kicks off, over 65 000 heroic polio health workers are once again ready to vaccinate children everywhere, adhering to strict COVID-19 precautionary measures and protocols. These measures include wearing a mask, using hand sanitizer, delivering vaccine through the 'no-touch' method and maintaining a safe distance during the vaccination.

As the polio programme gears up to rapidly boost immunity against polio through multiple upcoming campaigns, we urge parents and caregivers to ensure that all children under 5 years of age receive vaccinations during every campaign. Polio vaccines are safe and have also been strongly endorsed by national and global Islamic scholars, including the *ulama*. Vaccinating every child through multiple doses of the polio vaccine is the only way to stop the poliovirus currently in circulation across the country.

The programme remains concerned that approximately 3.3 million children across the country could be missed out due to a ban on door-to-door vaccinations in certain parts of the country. Unimpeded access to reach children with critical vaccinations and other essential services is the only way to stop polio and other outbreaks. The Government, WHO, UNICEF and health partners are urgently calling for a combined effort to ensure safe access to vaccinate all children in difficult and conflict-prone areas. Every Afghan has role to play in ending polio in Afghanistan.

Currently, Afghanistan and Pakistan remain the only 2 polio-endemic countries in the world.

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