

22 March 2020 – The Technical Advisory Group on Polio Eradication has concluded a 2-day session to review the polio eradication programme in Afghanistan, having heard presentations from the programme’s leadership at the national and provincial levels.

For the second time, the meeting was convened virtually. Technical Advisory Group members, Global Polio Eradication Initiative partners (GPEI) partners, donors and government representatives participated online from across the globe, in adherence with COVID-19 best practices.

The acting Minister of Public Health Dr Wahid Majrooh reiterated the commitment of the Government to end polio in Afghanistan during his address on the first day.

“We have continued our focus on tackling polio eradication as a matter of national emergency. The programme has the highest level of political commitment from H.E. President Ghani, all levels of the Ministry of Public Health and other line ministries,” said Dr Majrooh.

The Technical Advisory Group was established to review progress toward polio eradication in specific countries, assess the implementation of the programme and provide key recommendations to ensure the programme is on the right track.

In his initial remarks, Jean Marc Olive, the Chairperson of the ADvisory Group expressed appreciation of the exceptional work of the Afghanistan programme in the face of incredible challenges in the past year. He noted the impressive efforts of teams to resume the core business of polio eradication, despite the pandemic-related interruptions.

In March 2020, when the first wave of the COVID-19 began in Afghanistan, the polio programme turned its considerable human resources, health emergency experience and infrastructure to supporting the pandemic response. The programme’s nationwide network was used to bolster COVID-19 surveillance together with delivering public health messages to household and health facilities across the country. This became the primary focus of most of the polio programme during a pandemic-necessitated pause in immunization activities from February until July 2020. After the initial pause in campaigns, the programme safely resumed

polio vaccination while also continuing support to the COVID-19 response.

[Value of polio infrastructure in fighting COVID 19 in Afghanistan](#)

Despite significant success, polio transmission in Afghanistan has not been interrupted. “Lack of access in security-compromised areas, vaccine refusal, campaign fatigue, and sub optimal campaign quality in some areas of the country remain to be hurdles for polio eradication in Afghanistan. The polio programme is continuing to innovate to overcome these challenges,” said Mohammad Khakerah Rashidi, Senior Advisor for the Ministry of Public Health and National Emergency Operation Centre Coordinator, while speaking at the meeting.

WHO and UNICEF reiterated commitment to finish the job and expressed their appreciation of the leadership role of the Ministry.

“WHO and UNICEF are committed to implementing the recommendations of the Technical Advisory Group and working closely with the GPEI partners to address challenges that stand in the way of a polio free Afghanistan,” said Hamid Jafari, Director of Polio Eradication, WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region.

“We recognize the leadership of the Ministry of Public Health and the efforts of the Afghanistan polio team to end this disease,” said Paul Rutter, Regional Adviser, Maternal and Child Health, UNICEF Regional Office South Asia.

Previously, the 6-member TAG team would meet with stakeholders in person for the review. The new format, prompted by the global pandemic, but part of a broader review of the way the Group works, is now coordinated over a series of engagements. The final session, to take place on 20 March, will be the delivery of the final recommendations to the Minister of Health.

Earlier this week the WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean Dr Ahmed Al Mandhari, convened the first meeting of the Regional Subcommittee for Polio Eradication and Outbreaks. The Ministerial-level subcommittee will serve to support the remaining wild poliovirus-endemic and polio outbreak-affected countries in the Region in their intensified polio eradication efforts and help to facilitate polio transition. Dr Wahid Majrooh represented Afghanistan at the subcommittee meeting.

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