Kabul, 14 June 2021 – The Ministry of Public Health of Afghanistan, together with WHO and UNICEF launched today, the third national polio immunization campaign, which will run from 14 to 17
June 2021. The campaign aims to reach approximately, 9.9 million children under the age of 5 across the country with polio vaccines along with Albendazole deworming tablets.

Following a challenging year in 2020, the polio programme has intensified efforts to eradicate both wild poliovirus type 1 (WPV1) and circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2 (cVDPV2) outbreaks, which were exacerbated due to disruptions to polio campaigns because of the COVID-19 pandemic. So far, WPV1 and cVDPV2 outbreaks have been contained in all accessible areas of the country. However, poliovirus transmission continues in certain areas where bans on house-house vaccination persist, leaving millions of children vulnerable due to the programme's inability reach them for extended periods of time.

“It is extremely concerning that over 3.3 million children will yet again miss polio vaccination in certain areas of the country,” said Dr Wahid Majrooh, the acting Minister of Public Health. “Polio eradication is a collective responsibility. I strongly urge all parties to allow unimpeded access to reach children with critical vaccinations and other essential services.”

Vaccinating every child through multiple doses of the polio vaccine is the only way to stop the poliovirus currently in circulation in the country. Since the beginning of 2021, one WPV1 and 40 cVDPV2 cases have been confirmed in Afghanistan, with all of them originating in areas where the campaign has been unable to access children for immunization.

“We remain committed to eradicating polio,” said Dr Luo Dapeng, WHO Representative to Afghanistan. “We learnt valuable lessons during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic last year. These combined with the polio programme’s experience of managing health emergencies are important in helping us to safely continue delivering polio vaccination as we head towards a third wave of COVID-19,” he said.

With COVID-19 cases on the rise again, the polio programme is taking measures to ensure the brave and dedicated polio workers visiting parents and caregivers at their doorstep, adhere to strict COVID-19 precautionary measures and protocols while vaccinating children. These measures include wearing a mask, sanitizing hands and maintaining a safe distance while vaccinating children.

“I ask all parents and caregivers to take polio vaccination seriously and allow their children to be protected against polio. It is the only way to prevent paralysis,” said the acting Minister of Public Health. “We need the continued support of partners, caregivers and communities to finish the job,” he added.

Notes to the editor

Polio is incurable and can paralyse children for life. The polio vaccine is the only tool to prevent children from getting the disease. The Ministry of Public Health urges all parents and caregivers to ensure that all children are vaccinated during each campaign until the age of five. Repeated vaccines help to build strong immunity among children and the whole community.

Polio vaccines are safe and have also been strongly endorsed by national and global Islamic scholars, including the *ulama*.

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