

KABUL, Afghanistan, 24 October 2019 – As the world commemorates World Polio Day, the Ministry of Public Health, UNICEF, WHO and partners are taking a moment to recognize the tremendous efforts made by polio eradication frontline workers, who continue to work under difficult and challenging conditions to reach every child.

“Today, as we mark World Polio Day, let’s remember the number of children whose lives have been ravaged by polio, and many who live in insecure and inaccessible areas and continue to miss essential vaccinations,” said Dr Ahmad Jawad Osmani, acting Minister of Public Health. “COVID-19 has disrupted health services across the country, including polio campaigns, and as a result the number of polio cases have increased. We must scale up our efforts to reach every child. I’m calling on all parents and guardians to vaccinate children during the upcoming campaign,” Dr Osmani added.

Nationwide polio campaigns will resume for the first time since the COVID-19 epidemic first disrupted all health services. The campaigns scheduled for 26–30 October 2020 will target about 9.9 million children under the age of 5. Frontline workers will be armed with protective gear to avoid COVID-19 transmission while conducting the vaccination campaign.

Since the beginning of 2018, the polio programme in Afghanistan has provided close to 114 million doses of oral polio vaccines to children through campaigns. This has been made possible through the incredible work of the frontline workers. Nevertheless, a lot of work still needs to be done to interrupt the circulation of poliovirus in hotspots such as Kandahar, Helmand, Uruzgan Kunar and Nangahar provinces.

To date, there are 53 children who have permanently been disabled by polio. Of these children, 35 cases have been reported from the south region, 8 from west, 6 from southeast, 2 from east, and one each from north and northeast regions.

“The road to polio eradication is difficult but achieving the goal is not impossible,” said Peter Jan Graaff, acting WHO Representative in Afghanistan. “Widened immunity gaps, resulting from disruptions to vaccination campaigns because of COVID-19 and insecurity, are a critical challenge but also represent an opportunity for all parties to renew commitment and solidarity to secure a polio-free Afghanistan. The polio programme remains confident in its time-tested ability to adapt and innovate to end polio and continue support in building stronger health systems

through the delivery of essential health services, but we need everyone's support to cross the finish line."

Vaccinating every child through multiple doses of the polio vaccine is the only way to stop the polioviruses currently in circulation. It is a collective responsibility. Donors have committed the necessary funds; government and partners are working together to ensure vaccine availability; polio eradication workers are going beyond in challenging environments to reach children with vaccines. Now, it is the responsibility of parents and communities to ensure their children are protected against polio.

"When a child is paralysed, it is a life ruined, it's a burden to the family, community and indeed to everyone," said Sheema Sen Gupta, UNICEF Country Representative for Afghanistan. "This should not happen, every child deserves to be protected against polio. Despite the challenges, we need to adapt strategies that accelerate the eradication of polio and do our part and complete the job."

The Government, WHO, UNICEF and health partners are calling for a combined effort and safe access to vaccinate all children in difficult and conflict-prone areas. Every Afghan has role to play in ending polio in Afghanistan.

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