18 June 2014, Erbil, Iraq - Joint efforts by WHO and UNICEF have resulted in the Kurdistan health authorities agreeing on urgent measures to prevent the spread of polio and other diseases among children displaced during the ongoing crisis in Iraq, which has seen a large influx of displaced people into the Kurdish-controlled north of Iraq.

Stepped up immunization efforts to target host population and IDP camps and border crossings were among steps agreed at a meeting on Tuesday between Dr Rekawt H. Rashid Karim, Kurdistan Region Minister of Health, and UNICEF Representative Dr Marzio Babille.

Around 300 000 people are believed to have entered various parts of the Kurdistan region, especially Duhok and Erbil, over the past few days. Government sources indicate that these displaced people, about half of whom are children, have mostly settled in host communities.

Dr Syed Jaffar Hussain, WHO Representative in Iraq, welcomed the Ministry of Health's decision to extend vaccination campaigns among host populations in order to reach all children from the IDP population. WHO and UNICEF will jointly support the Kurdish health authorities in these mass campaign efforts.

Iraq recorded its first polio case earlier this year after 14 years of being polio free. With poor routine immunization among people from conflict zones, the Region has now become vulnerable to a bigger outbreak with high numbers of unvaccinated or under-immunized children.

During the meeting in Erbil, Dr Babille urged expanding immunization services against polio beyond the Syrian refugee camps, which was the primary focus of the ongoing campaign that started on 15 June, as well as the positioning of polio immunization teams at transit points where displaced populations cross into or out of the Kurdistan Region. UNICEF is also calling for rapid efforts to protect displaced children against measles and to provide vitamin A. Dr Babille spoke about supporting the Ministry in vaccines and also with technical expertise on social mobilization and external communication.

The Minister emphasized the need to keep the Kurdistan region polio free; a meeting held on 18

June as a follow up, agreed to support polio and measles vaccinations at checkpoints, camps and border crossings. The catch up polio campaign is tentatively planned from 29 June to 3 July targeting more than 700 000 children under the age of 5. This will be the first time in which Iraq has organized a mass public health campaign during the holy month of Ramadan.

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