

Islamabad, 2 March 2018 – The Government of Japan has announced today that they will be providing US\$ 3.2 million for the procurement of equipment for the Regional Reference Laboratory for polio eradication, located in the National Institute of Health in Islamabad.

With the procurement of state-of-the-art molecular-biology equipment including genetic analysers, real time polymerase chain reaction machines, incubators and freezers, among others, the laboratory will significantly enhance its sample processing capacity. Through this new equipment, the Regional Reference Laboratory will improve the speed of the results reported from the stool samples that it receives of people suffering from acute flaccid paralysis, in addition to samples taken from the sewage in areas identified as being at risk of polio. In 2017 alone, the Regional Reference Laboratory tested 30 000 stool samples and 950 environmental samples coming from both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In addition, the Japanese grant will be used to replace aging stocks of cold chain materials, reagents and the other essential equipment needed to be able to accurately isolate and identify wild poliovirus from stool and environmental samples.

In an event hosted by the Ministry of National Health Services, Regulations and Coordination, the Notes corresponding to the grant were officially signed by the representatives of the Government of Japan, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and World Health Organization (WHO).

Speaking at the signing ceremony, the Federal Minister of National Health Services, Regulations and Coordination Mrs Saira Afzal Tarar said: “The steady support of the Government of Japan and other partners, and the strong partnership have been crucial elements of the programme’s tremendous progress over the past two years. The new grant will help strengthen polio surveillance through adaptation of new technology and contribute towards polio eradication in the country.”

H.E. Mr Takashi Kurai, Ambassador of Japan to Pakistan said: “Maintaining the strong polio surveillance system that has been established in Pakistan remains critical for eradication work. We are pleased to be a part of this honourable initiative. However, in order to eradicate polio altogether from Pakistan, it is not sufficient to promote vaccination activities. We should also address the unawareness of the matter among the people and the need for building up the

necessary infrastructure for enhancing the activities. Japan will continue to support Pakistan for polio eradication from a wider perspective in order to achieve the complete eradication of polio.”

Mr Yasuhiro Tojo, Chief Representative, JICA Pakistan Office said: “JICA has been supporting the polio programme and routine immunization since 1996 and 2001 respectively”. He further added: “I sincerely believe that through the concerted implementation of this grant aid, the polio surveillance system will progress across the provinces and districts. This will improve the routine immunization situation in the country including polio. That will help the government of Pakistan not only to eradicate polio but also to sustain a polio-free Pakistan after eradication.”

Pakistan’s Polio Eradication Programme has come a long way towards building a future in which polio no longer endangers children, families, and communities across the country. Only eight polio cases were recorded in 2017, compared to 20 in 2016 and 54 in 2015. “Japan’s support comes during a critical time when the role of polio surveillance, particularly a well-functioning laboratory, is more important than ever,” said Mr Christopher Maher, Polio Eradication and Emergency Support Manager, WHO.

The Government of Japan has supported the Polio Eradication Initiative in Pakistan since 1996. Approximately 24 billion yen (US\$ 224 million), including this grant of US\$ 3.2 million, has been given to Pakistan to strengthen the Polio Eradication Programme and curb this crippling disease.

## **Note to Editors**

Polio is a highly infectious disease caused by a virus mainly affecting children under the age of five. It invades the nervous system, and can cause paralysis or even death. While there is no cure for polio, vaccination is the most effective way to protect our children from this crippling disease. Each time a child under the age of five is vaccinated, their, and the communities, protection against the virus is increased. Repeated immunizations have protected millions of children from polio, allowing almost all countries in the world to become polio free.

Detecting every poliovirus transmission chain in a timely manner is one of the key objectives of the Pakistan Polio Eradication Initiative and the integral goal of the National Emergency Action Plan for Polio Eradication. In addition to being able to detect all cases of acute flaccid paralysis in a timely manner, the polio surveillance system should be able to investigate all acute flaccid paralysis cases, as well as collect and appropriately store, ship, and test stool specimens at the Regional Reference Laboratory, confirming the presence or absence of polioviruses.

To further strengthen polio surveillance, the Pakistan polio eradication programme has used environmental surveillance to detect poliovirus in sewage in strategic locations since 2009, with the network expanding over time to have a wider coverage. Currently, there are 53 sampling sites designated in a total of 33 districts and towns in the country, making it the largest environmental surveillance network in the world. Samples collected from environmental sampling sites are also tested at the Regional Reference Laboratory for polio eradication in Islamabad.

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