Islamabad, 17 November 2015 – The fight against polio in Pakistan is being strenghened through the expansion of the activities of the religious leaders initiative. Following the lead of the Islamic Advisory Group on Polio Eradication, the National Islamic Advisory Group and provincial scholars' taskforces are bringing together renowned and influential religious leaders to support efforts to eradicate polio. There have been 32 wild poliovirus cases in Pakistan so far in 2015, a 75% decrease compared to the same period in 2014.

The initiative has reached the local level and is assisting the polio immunization programme through 62 provincial scholars' taskforces and 752 religious support persons in 450 high-risk union council localities across 23 districts and agencies situated in the 4 polio reservoir areas in the country. Through this initiative, the polio vaccination programme has gained access to chronically inaccessible districts.

Religious support persons receive training on polio eradication and are supervised by the provincial scholars' taskforces. Workingas part of the union council polio eradication committees, they approach families who refuse immunization and local opinion formers to correct religious misconceptions and facilitate the vaccination of persistently missed children. At the same time, efforts are made to create demand among communities for routine immunization.

Furthermore, religious support persons are successfully assisting community-based polio vaccination programmes through the identification of female community volunteers in 8 high-risk union council localities in Karachi and identifying community health volunteers in culturally-sensitive union council localities in Quetta.

The National Islamic Advisory Group, which receives technical and financial support from WHO, continues to advocate with religious institutions and organizations for their engagement in polio eradication and immunization programmes. It does capacity-building of union council-level ulemas, facilitates the recording and broadcasting of messages by prominent ulemas at national, provincial and district levels, and engages with the editors and owners of religious publications.

The National Islamic Advisory Group and the provincial scholars' taskforces will be making their services available at polio fixed sites during campaigns and at permanent centres for routine

immunization.

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Global Polio Eradication Initiative

Poliomyelitis

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