



Islamabad, 23 February 2020 – Pakistan’s regional reference for polio has been upgraded with support from the Government of Japan through a grant worth US\$ 3.3 million. The support will boost Pakistan’s capacity to swiftly track and respond to the poliovirus. The laboratory currently tests more than 30 000 stool samples and 950 environmental samples for polio a year from Afghanistan and Pakistan as part of the global effort to end virus circulation in both polio-endemic countries. The support from the Government of Japan has helped procure essential molecular-biology equipment for the laboratory; including genetic analysers, real time thermal cyclinders, incubators and freezers. The grant has also been used to replace ageing stocks of cold chain materials, reagents and other essential equipment.

“This laboratory is now one of the largest and best surveillance networks in the world for polio. A well-functioning laboratory is critical for ensuring successful surveillance in place to detect and respond to outbreaks,” shared Dr Palitha Mahipala, WHO Representative in Pakistan.

Representatives from the Ministry of National Health Services, Regulation and Coordination, the

Government of Japan, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the World Health Organization (WHO) ceremoniously handed over this equipment during a ceremony at the National Institute for Health.

Participants were briefed by the National Coordinator Dr Rana Muhammad Safdar on strategies and approaches being implemented in the country to push the polio virus back during 2020. "Polio eradication is being promoted as a shared responsibility and response of different segments during last two campaigns has been very encouraging," he stated.

"This prestigious and high tech laboratory supports the largest surveillance network for polio which enabling country programmes to generate required response efficiently," shared Dr Palitha Mahipala, WHO Representative in Pakistan.

Speaking at the ceremony, the Secretary of the Ministry of National Health Services, Regulations and Coordination, Dr Allah Bakhsh Malik said, "The support of the Government of Japan has been vital to Pakistan's efforts to eradicate polio. Recent enhancements to the regional reference laboratory will further up-build our capacity to effectively tackle the associated risks in timely manner"

Dr Kitaoka Shinichi, the President of JICA also spoke at the ceremony. "I am delighted that our grant is being utilized effectively in this regional reference laboratory". He added, "We have been supporting the Polio Eradication Programme for almost 25 years. Currently, the programme is going through a very critical and important transformation. JICA will continue our support towards the untiring efforts of the Pakistani government."

The Ambassador of Japan to Pakistan, H.E. Mr Matsuda Kuninori, added, "the Government of Japan remains committed to assisting the Government of Pakistan in its goal of eradicating polio," referring to its assistance of US\$ 229 million in total provided to Pakistan for polio eradication since 1996. He also appreciated the role of laboratory in promoting regional cooperation by testing not only domestic polio samples but also ones from Afghanistan.

The Executive Director of NIH, Major General Aamer Ikram, attended the ceremony as well. He extended appreciation for the upgradation to the laboratory, adding that, "Pakistan's tenacity to tackle the aggressive polio virus over the years has been made possible through the generous

assistance of donors such as the Government of Japan.”

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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 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 Programme 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 (AFP) in a timely manner, the polio surveillance system should be able to investigate all AFP 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 60 sampling sites designated in a total of 34 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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