



Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, attends the fourth meeting of the National Task Force on Polio Eradication in Pakistan Islamabad, 7 August 2012 – Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, has praised the efforts of the Government of Pakistan in decreasing the number of polio cases in Pakistan while highlighting concerns about the remaining challenges.

Attending the fourth meeting of the National Task Force on Polio Eradication in Pakistan, chaired by the Prime Minister, Dr Alwan said he was encouraged by the number of polio cases this year (29), compared to the same time last year (71). However, Dr Alwan expressed serious concern about the unresolved challenges in the three major poliovirus transmission zones in Pakistan – Federally Administered Tribal Area, Quetta and adjoining districts, and parts of Karachi.

Dr Alwan underscored that polio eradication cannot be achieved in Pakistan until the children in Khyber, particularly Bara, who have been inaccessible to the programme since 2009 are reached and vaccinated. “Pakistan has turned the corner through its Emergency Action Plan,” said Dr Alwan, “Nevertheless, the deteriorating security situation in Karachi, impaired access in Bara in Khyber and the recent ban in North and South Waziristan constitute a substantial risk to all the efforts.”

The Regional Director put special emphasis on reaching and vaccinating high-risk and highly mobile groups. The common denominator linking the main transmission zones are communities which are under-served by health services: 73% of polio cases this year are from the Federally Administered Tribal Area and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Dr Alwan has raised the alarm over the situation in North and South Waziristan, where a locally announced ban on vaccination has put more than 200 000 children at immediate and escalating risk of polio. If not addressed, this ban will seriously jeopardize the efforts of the Government of Pakistan and partner organizations.

Assuring the Prime Minister that WHO will continue its commitment to support polio eradication in the country, Dr Alwan drew attention to the recent incidents in Karachi which injured two WHO staff and killed one Pakistani polio team member. He urged the Government of Pakistan to take strong and decisive steps to ensure the safety and security of all polio workers, including those from international organizations.

On Quetta and surrounding districts, Dr Alwan noted that although remarkable efforts made by the provincial administrative leadership have resulted in recent gains, ongoing managerial weaknesses, particularly in Pishin, endanger the gains.

Later in the day, the Regional Director met President Asif Ali Zardari to discuss the progress and the challenges to the polio programme in Pakistan. Commending the financial contributions of the provincial governments, the Regional Director urged the Federal Government to make additional substantial financial contributions, similar to those made by the Governments of India and Nigeria. Dr Alwan informed the President that he was very encouraged by the growing interest among countries of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to support polio eradication activities in Pakistan and Afghanistan through the Islamic Development Bank.

The Regional Director acknowledged the strong efforts of the federal and provincial governments and the dynamic support of the Prime Minister's Focal Person for Polio Eradication and the chair of the Polio Oversight Committee. He acknowledged, in particular, the leadership of the Deputy Commissioners and the hard work of medical officers and vaccinators for improving the quality of polio eradication campaigns at the district and union council levels.

Dr Alwan deeply appreciated the clear statements of commitment by the President and the Prime Minister of Pakistan that the federal and provincial governments would effectively tackle the challenges in the Federally Administered Tribal Area and other poliovirus transmission zones and will provide adequate security to all polio workers across the country.

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