



Credit: WHO/Pakistan

9 March 2023 – On Tuesday 28 February 2023, ministers and high-level delegates from across the Eastern Mediterranean Region participated in the seventh meeting of the Regional Subcommittee for Polio Eradication and Outbreaks.

The meeting came at a time of contrasts for polio eradication efforts. On the one hand, the Region’s most recent case of wild poliovirus was reported almost 5 months ago, in Pakistan, and the footprint of the virus is the smallest it has ever been. Additionally, efforts to search for polioviruses have never been stronger and the polio programme has made significant progress in accessing under-immunized children across a number of high-risk countries in the last year. On the other hand, the Region hosts 4 of the world’s 7 ‘consequential geographies’ – low-resource, high-risk areas in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen that the programme has identified as carrying a significant risk of spread of polio.

WHO’s Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, who convened this virtual meeting, set the tone for the event by coining 2023 as a “defining year” for polio eradication.

He urged all Member States and partners to leverage the opportunity and momentum of the current moment and scale up collective efforts to wipe out polio. “Going forward, our regional solidarity and concerted action will be even more important, as we move closer to making history and ending polio,” said Dr Al-Mandhari.

Leading the demonstration of regional support to polio were the Co-chairs, Minister of Public Health of Qatar, HE Dr Hanan Al Kuwari, and Minister of Health and Prevention United Arab Emirates, HE Mr Abdul Rahman Mohammed Al Owais. They urged participating Member States to strengthen routine immunization and consider polio as “all of our problem” until transmission ends everywhere. They also called on Member States to offer all they can – funding, advocacy or technical expertise – to reach every child with vaccines.

Participants at the meeting also included ministers of health and senior delegates from countries in the Region, in addition to representatives from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), the Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC), Gavi, Rotary and UNICEF.

In his address, the Minister of National Health Services Regulations and Coordination of

Pakistan updated the audience of the timely and robust programmatic actions the country has been taking to end polio. In the face of catastrophic floods, the country turned response efforts into an opportunity to offer polio vaccines to children wherever possible. Additionally, Pakistan is using creative ways, such as truck art, to reach out to vulnerable communities living in hard-to-reach areas.

During discussions, the delegate from Egypt and the Minister of Health of Yemen offered updates on their polio eradication efforts, while delegates from Iraq and Saudi Arabia proposed actions to prevent the spread of polio during mass religious gatherings in their countries.

Member States and partners acknowledged the immense efforts directed at ending polio in the 2 countries where it is still endemic – Afghanistan and Pakistan – particularly in the wake of the earthquake and catastrophic flooding that took place in 2022, and the extraordinary political will and engagement in both countries. They also noted the work ongoing in countries witnessing outbreaks of circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2 (cVDPV2), and lauded health workers for their valour and dedication to their work.

Member States issued 2 statements following the meeting. [One called for the international development and humanitarian communities and donors to scale up support to the National Emergency Action Plans for Afghanistan and Pakistan](#)

. [A second statement called for international partners to provide essential services, including a robust vaccination response, to polio outbreaks in Somalia and Yemen](#)

. In Yemen's northern governorates, amidst a surge of anti-vaccine propaganda, a long-overdue outbreak response has still not been launched, and Somalia is experiencing the longest ever cVDPV2 outbreak.

Member States also reiterated the importance of focusing on zero-dose children, and strengthening routine immunization and surveillance in countries that are polio-free and those that currently have polioviruses. They also commended Regional Director Dr Al-Mandhari for his leadership and requested him to continue to support Member States in the Region to push towards ending polio and attaining Health for All by All.

While updating participants on a recent visit made by a high-level mission to Pakistan last year, a representative from the BMGF, on behalf of Dr Chris Elias, the Chair of the Polio Oversight Board, acknowledged the extraordinary and unmatched efforts made in Pakistan by the political

and health leadership, law enforcement and security agencies, to prevent any further spread of polio. Despite the flooding and political changes the country has faced, the polio programme continued to “shift gears” and mount a swift and robust response to polio. This was one of several visits that high-level missions have been making to Pakistan in support of eradication efforts.

In closing remarks, WHO representatives recognized Iraq and Syria for the strides both countries have taken to maintain essential polio functions, including in polio surveillance, while concurrently transitioning away from funding from the Global Polio Eradication Initiative.

The seventh meeting of the Regional Subcommittee for Polio Eradication and Outbreaks demonstrated the high level of confidence that Member States and partners have in the 2 remaining polio-endemic countries, Afghanistan and Pakistan. As polio remains a Public Health Emergency of International Concern under the International Health Regulations (2005), the intensified regional- and international-level collaboration of Member States and partners at events like this will serve as a springboard for focused action in 2023.

Note for editors

The Polio Oversight Board is the highest decision-making body in the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI). It brings together senior leadership of the 6 GPEI partner agencies—the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Gavi, Rotary International, UNICEF, and the World Health Organization (WHO)—along with a representative of the GPEI’s donor community.

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of WHO, visited Pakistan in his role as Chair of the Polio Oversight Board at the time. Following this, since mid-2021, the Polio Oversight Board* made 3 visits, and Mr Bill Gates of the BMGF visited in February 2022.

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