

Members issue two statements on Yemen and Afghanistan calling for uninterrupted access for vaccinations to all children

Cairo, 10 February 2022 – The fourth meeting of the Regional Subcommittee on Polio Eradication and Outbreaks was convened on Wednesday 9 February, by WHO’s Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari. The meeting was attended by health ministers or their representatives from Djibouti, Egypt, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

The Subcommittee declared the ongoing circulation of any strain of poliovirus in the Region to be a regional public health emergency and called on all authorities to enable uninterrupted access to the youngest and most vulnerable children through the resumption of house-to-house vaccination campaigns. It issued statements on wild poliovirus circulation in Afghanistan and Pakistan and on the circulation of vaccine-derived poliovirus strains in Yemen, where limits on house-to-house vaccination are preventing access to the most vulnerable children.

The spread of polio in the Eastern Mediterranean Region is a pressing emergency and it remains a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) under the International Health Regulations (IHR 2005).

Members noted a sharp decrease in cases of wild poliovirus in Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2021 but warned against complacency.

“Wild poliovirus transmission is at a historic low in the endemic countries of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The progress is remarkable, but it is fragile. The opportunity to end polio is knocking at our door, and we must seize it,” said Dr Al-Mandhari.

Speaking to the progress made in the last year, the Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Health, Dr Faisal Sultan, assured members that the programme in Pakistan was leaving no stone unturned in the pursuit of zero polio transmission.

“We have intensified efforts in the hardest districts and core reservoirs and we are closely monitoring transmission across the border in coordination with Afghanistan, taking measures to respond to outbreaks if they occur and making every effort to ensure that the virus doesn’t spill over in either direction. To boost the confidence of marginalized communities, we are also providing essential services and vaccination of other antigens and diseases,” he said.

Outbreaks of circulating vaccine-derived polioviruses type 1 (cVDPV1) and type 2 (cVDPV2) continued to emerge and spread in the Region in 2021. As of February 2022, Afghanistan, Djibouti, Egypt, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen are responding to transmission of vaccine-derived polioviruses.

“The increasing outbreaks of circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2 in the Eastern Mediterranean Region and neighbouring countries of Africa are deeply concerning and must be stopped rapidly. To do so, we need to ensure that we are creating an enabling environment for health workers to reach children with those two drops of polio vaccine,” said newly nominated co-chair H.E. Dr Hanan Mohamed Al Kuwari, Minister of Public Health of Qatar.

During the meeting, Djibouti’s Public Health Minister, Dr Ahmed Robleh Abdilleh, shared plans for vaccination campaigns and increased surveillance in response to the transmission of cVDPV2, recently detected through the newly launched environmental sampling programme.

Reflecting on the work of the Subcommittee, co-chair and Minister of Health and Prevention of the United Arab Emirates H.E. Abdul Rahman Mohammed Al Owais urged members to sustain the commitment seen in in 2021.

“We have together advocated for an increase in domestic funds, we have driven collaborative public health action in our own countries, and collectively pushed for a regional response to address the regional public health emergency of the poliovirus. But these things alone will not end transmission,” he said.

Dr Al-Mandhari expressed appreciation for Egypt’s role as the first country in the Region to roll out a nationwide vaccination campaign using the novel poliovirus vaccine, and Chris Elias, Chair of the Polio Oversight Board, praised the remarkable progress made in polio eradication in Pakistan with support of the United Arab Emirate’s Pakistan Assistance Programme.

“This regional solidarity and commitment we have seen, through this Subcommittee, is something I am proud of. It is this commitment to the end goal that will help push us over the last mile,” said Dr Hamid Jafari, director of the regional polio programme and co-facilitator of the Regional Subcommittee.

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### **Notes for editors**

The Regional Subcommittee was formally endorsed by Member States through a resolution at the 67th session of the Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean in October 2020. The first meeting was held in March 2021.

The Subcommittee focuses on four strategic areas of focus to engage in coordinated action and support of regional polio eradication efforts including pushing for collective public health action, strengthening efforts to transition polio assets and infrastructure, advocating for the mobilization of national and international funding to sustain polio eradication efforts.

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