

Jeddah, 26 February 2014 – The Islamic Advisory Group (IAG) for polio eradication on Wednesday held its first meeting to review the global polio situation, particularly in polio-endemic, predominantly Muslim countries where the disease continues to strike and cripple children.

The recently formed IAG was meeting for two days to reaffirm the support of the Islamic community and leadership to polio eradication and trust in the safety and effectiveness of vaccination. The entire Muslim world is almost polio-free. But where polio survives, it is overwhelmingly in Muslim communities and it is therefore unacceptable that even a few children should be denied their right to a life without disability. Enough children in these communities remain unvaccinated for poliovirus to survive – either because they do not have the opportunity to be vaccinated or because of conflict and insecurity.

Polio vaccination and all health interventions must be offered impartially and should not be used for political or other purposes. Attacks on health workers and facilities must be stopped. The health of all children is at risk if health workers and health facilities are attacked.

The success of the entire 24-year global effort to protect all future generations of children from polio paralysis now depends on success in parts of Pakistan, Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan. There is a global strategic plan that addresses improving the operational aspects of polio vaccination campaigns; for this plan to succeed this year, the complementary support of the Islamic community and its leaders is needed.

The IAG was slated to develop an action plan that will outline specific activities to address this polio situation in the Muslim world, particularly stressing the religious duty of leaders and parents to protect children and to allow health workers to carry out their duties in safety. IAG's meetings are held at the headquarters of the 57-member Organization of Islamic cooperation (OIC) in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

The new group, which is mandated to provide high-level global leadership and guidance for building ownership, solidarity and support for polio eradication across the Muslim world, will also hammer out the final touches on its role, structure, procedures, mode of operation and other organizational details.

In a keynote statement, President of the Council of International Islamic Fiqh Academy Sheikh Dr Saleh Bin Abdullah Bin Humaid argued that as long as the purpose of vaccination is the welfare of people and the substance used to make vaccines was uncontaminated and not forbidden, it should be “acceptable to Sharia” – or Islamic law.

Bin Humaid is co-chairing the IAG meetings with the Undersecretary of Egypt’s Al Azhar Al Sharif Sheikh Dr Abbas Shuman. The Jeddah-based Academy and the Cairo-based Al Azhar, together with the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), both based in Jeddah as well, are the major founding members of IAG. A representative from Egypt’s Dar Al-Ifta, which issues Muslim religious edicts, also participated.

Co-chairman Shuman emphatically denounced what he termed “fallacious and distorted fatwas (edicts) and claims” against polio vaccines and strongly condemned violent attacks waged against polio vaccinators. He announced in his statement that Al Azhar will task its preachers and clergymen around the world to demystify polio-related misconceptions and advocate for polio vaccination in their sermons.

In his address to the opening meeting, Secretary-General of OIC Dr Iyad Madany pointed out that polio eradication poses a considerable challenge to his multinational Islamic organization, “since 95% of polio cases reported in 2013 were recorded in OIC member states.”

President of the IDB Dr Ahmed Mohamed Ali Al Madani, noted that his bank allocated US\$ 227 million to support the Pakistani Government’s polio eradication efforts, emphasizing that such contribution was “a religious duty.”

Addressing the meeting, Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, reminded conferees that polio was paralyzing about 1000 children daily worldwide, but with the development of a very safe vaccine and global efforts to ensure that the vaccine reaches every child, a 99.9% decline was achieved. “Through this effort, more than 10 million people are walking today who would otherwise have been paralyzed,” he said.

The IAG conferees were scheduled to issue a Jeddah Declaration at the end of their meetings

and leaders of the group will hold a press conference to shed more light on IAG, its action plan and other details of interest.

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