

Islamic Advisory Group adopts urgent plan of action against polio

Jeddah, 27 February 2014 – The world's leading Islamic scholars, led by the Grand Imam of the Holy Mosque of Mecca, today stated that protection against diseases is obligatory and admissible under Islamic Shariah, and that any actions which do not support these preventive measures and cause harm to humanity are un-Islamic. The scholars adopted a strong "Jeddah Declaration" and a focused six-month Plan of Action to address critical challenges facing polio eradication efforts in the few remaining polio-endemic parts of the Islamic world: a ban on vaccinations and lack of access to children in some areas, deadly attacks on health workers, and misconceptions by the community about mass vaccination campaigns.

During the first meeting of the Global Islamic Advisory Group (IAG) for polio eradication, religious leaders denounced violence against health workers involved in polio vaccination campaigns, noting that such violence caused lasting harm to children and communities. The remarks were made in the context of a growing climate of violence against health workers and facilities in situations of conflict and instability, such as in Pakistan, Somalia and Syria.

The scholars reiterated the safety and acceptability in Islam of vaccination against polio, saying it was a sin to claim the contrary and expose children to unnecessary risk. While most of the world – including the Muslim community of nations – is polio-free, the three countries which remain endemic for polio are largely Muslim: Pakistan, Nigeria and Afghanistan.

The scholars expressed alarm that failure to vaccinate and protect children in parts of these countries threatens the rest of the Muslim world. Poliovirus from Pakistan and Nigeria has caused paralytic outbreaks of polio in Syria and Somalia, respectively. Both the latter countries have seen their health infrastructures collapse in conflict, leaving children unvaccinated and making outbreak response particularly challenging.

Representing various schools of Islamic scholarship and thought, the IAG was convened following a consultation of leading scholars in March 2013. The group is intended to bolster the support of the Islamic community and leadership to polio eradication and to communicate trust in the safety and effectiveness of vaccination.

The group adopted a six-month action plan with a focus on support to Pakistan and Somalia, which have the highest number of children paralyzed by polio. IAG members will advocate with

national and local religious leaders on the religious duty of parents and communities to protect children and to allow health workers to carry out their duties in safety. The group also resolved to ensure that information on the safety of vaccination is easily available to relevant religious and community leaders and to advocate for financial and technical support for polio eradication with the Islamic donor community.

The IAG is co-chaired by the International Islamic Fiqh Academy and Al Azhar Al Sharif. The Jeddah-based Fiqh Academy and the Cairo-based Al Azhar Al Sharif, together with the Islamic Development Bank and Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) are the major founding members of IAG. The group meets at the headquarters of the 57-member OIC in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

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