A national polio immunization drive to protect 4.2 million Iraqi children was launched on the 12th of November by the Iraq Ministry of Health in collaboration World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF, after being postponed for a week because of security concerns.

The polio National Immunization Days (NIDs) will send over 5400 mobile vaccinators house-to-house across the country to immunize every child under five in a bid to maintain Iraq's polio-free status. UNICEF has supplied five million doses of oral polio vaccine (OPV) for the campaigns and is assisting transport and communication efforts to help vaccinators reach children in Iraq's most remote and insecure areas. The World Health Organization (WHO) has provided vital support for planning and training of local health staff and volunteers in additions to incentives for vaccination teams and supervisors.

Some parts of northern Iraq that were able to launch the campaign last Sunday as scheduled are reporting a high turnout. WHO Iraq Country representative who is leading the United Nations Health Cluster for Iraq, traveled to Irbil during the period 7-9 November to support the efforts of the Iraq Ministry of health in ensuring the quality and monitoring the National immunization days (NIDs).

This is Iraq's second polio drive of the year. The first NIDs were held in April and May and immunized over 96% of the target population. The current campaign will last five days and be repeated in December.

Polio is a highly infectious and incurable disease that can cause lifelong paralysis. Most of its victims are children under five years old. Iraq's last polio case was reported in 2000. But a recent global resurgence of the disease has brought a renewed threat to the region. Yemen, Saudia Arabia and Sudan have all been re-infected since 2004, making this campaign critical to safeguard Iraq's children.

Iraq is part of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, the world's largest public health drive spearheaded by WHO, Rotary International, the U.S. Centre for Disease Control and Prevention and UNICEF. This international effort has reduced the incidence of polio by more than 99 per cent. Only four countries have yet to stop polio transmission – Nigeria, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan – the lowest number in history.

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Saturday 12th of October 2024 08:26:41 AM