

UNICEF and WHO appeal for improved access to children

Cairo, Amman, 9 December 2013 – The largest-ever immunization response in the Middle East is under way this week, aiming to vaccinate more than 23 million children against polio in Syria and neighbouring countries over the coming weeks.

The campaign is a crucial part of the response to an outbreak of the virus-borne disease in Syria, where 17 cases have so far been confirmed, and to the detection of the virus in environmental samples in other parts of the Middle East.

In order to stop the outbreak and prevent further spread, organizers aim to vaccinate, repeatedly over the next few months, all children under the age of five, whether they are living at home or displaced by conflict. Depending on the area, vaccination will be offered at fixed sites at populous locations or by going from house to house. The activities are carried out by national and local health authorities supported by UNICEF, WHO, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and other partners.

Inside Syria, the campaign aims to reach 2.2 million children, including those who live in contested areas and those who were missed in an earlier campaign. Many children in Syria remain inaccessible, particularly those trapped in sealed off areas or living in areas where conflict is ongoing.

Despite the gaps in coverage, initial information suggests that vaccine is getting to more areas of Syria than has so far been the case for health interventions delivered as part of the larger ongoing humanitarian effort. In parallel with the vaccination effort, work is going on to bolster systems for verifying coverage data in upcoming campaigns inside the war-torn country.

“All Syrian children should be protected from disease,” noted Dr. Ala Alwan, Regional Director, WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region. “To eradicate polio, we need to eradicate any reason for failing to reach children. We appeal to all parties of the conflict in Syria to cooperate and facilitate pauses in hostilities over the coming 6 months to allow vaccination campaigns to reach all children.”

“As if children in Syria had not suffered enough, they now have to contend with yet another threat to their health and well-being,” said Maria Calivis, UNICEF Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa. “The current polio vaccination efforts are a huge undertaking by many partners, but we can only halt the spread of the virus if we reach those children who have remained out of reach.”

Over the coming months, UNICEF is planning to deliver 10 million doses of polio vaccine to Syria. The first shipment of 2 million vaccines arrived in Damascus on Friday 29 November.

The total cost to UNICEF and WHO of supporting the seven-country polio response from November through April is US\$ 39 million, based on a strategic plan developed for the Middle East.

NOTE TO EDITORS

As of 26 November, 17 children have been paralyzed by polio in Syria: 15 of these children are in the contested governorate of Deir Ez Zour, one is in Aleppo and another in Douma, near Damascus. Prior to this outbreak, no polio cases have been recorded in Syria since 1999. The risk of spread to countries in the region and beyond is considered high, and health authorities from 21 countries have declared a public health emergency. Further polio immunization campaigns will be repeated across the region. In Syria, they will be carried out at monthly intervals until April 2014.

Genetically-related polioviruses, which originated in Pakistan, have also been detected in sewage samples in Egypt in December 2012, and in Israel and the West Bank and Gaza Strip earlier in 2013.

Inside Syria and for the past two years, immunization activities have been significantly constrained by ongoing conflict. Cold chain equipment in many districts has been lost and many mobile health teams have not been able to perform regular visits. This has led to missing out on vaccinating between 500,000-700,000 children in these areas.

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Saturday 27th of April 2024 09:17:50 AM