Mogadishu, Garowe, Hargeisa, 10 June 2014 – Outbreaks of measles in several regions have left thousands of Somali children at risk of disability or death unless they are urgently vaccinated against the highly contagious disease.

In March and April 2014 there were over 1350 suspected cases of measles – four times the number seen during the same period last year and nearly 1000 cases were reported in May alone.

In response, the health authorities, with the support of UNICEF, the World Health Organization (WHO) and partners, have conducted small scale vaccination campaigns and will carry out larger emergency campaigns in the most affected areas of Bari, Nugaal, Mudug, Banadir and Lower Juba in June targeting half a million children under five.

"We have a very high number of malnourished Somali children," said Sikander Khan, UNICEF Somalia Representative. "Malnourished children here are more susceptible to disease and are more likely to die or suffer life-long disability such as blindness, deafness or brain damage as a result of contracting measles."

Two decades of conflict have decimated Somalia’s health sector, leaving the country with some of the worst health and nutrition indicators in the world. An estimated one in five children dies before their fifth birthday – with measles as one of the main causes.

"This is extremely alarming. There is a very poor health care system due to the years of conflict," said Dr Ghulam Popal, WHO Somalia Representative. "We know there have been extremely low immunization rates among Somali children and we need to urgently ensure as many as possible are vaccinated."

It is estimated that less than a third of Somali children under one year were vaccinated against measles in 2013 through routine immunization services. In some areas in central and southern Somalia insecurity has meant that immunization coverage is as low as 15%.
WHO and UNICEF say that a nationwide measles campaigns need to be urgently conducted to prevent thousands of avoidable deaths. This would involve vaccinating about 5 million children and youth from 9 months to 15 years at an estimated cost of US$ 9 million.

WHO estimates that in complex emergencies such as that in Somalia, 10% of children affected by measles could die from complications.

Read the press release in Somali

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