



National Immunization Days aim to keep Sudan polio-free

Three day campaign sets out to reach more than 8 million children across the country

Khartoum/Juba 25 March 2007. The first round of Sudan's National Immunization Days against polio in 2007 gets underway on Monday 26 March, with a focus on ensuring that no eligible child is overlooked during the three day campaign.

An estimated 8.7 million children under the age of five will be targeted across Sudan during the National Immunization Days, including 2.7 million in Southern Sudan. The campaign is being spearheaded by government health departments at national and local level, with vaccines, technical support and funding provided by UNICEF, WHO and other partners. Local NGOs will also be involved in implementing the campaign, which costs an estimated US\$3 million for every round.

WHO Country Representative Dr. Mohamed Abdurrab noted that the success of polio immunization efforts in 2006 had resulted in no cases being reported anywhere in Sudan, compared to 155 in 2004-2005. "High coverage levels during these campaigns, complemented by improved routine vaccination of children as part of their ongoing health care, are critical to Sudan remaining polio-free," he said.

"With Sudan being surrounded by a number of countries where polio is endemic, we must remain ever-vigilant, and this week's National Immunization Days will play an important part in protecting Sudan from the crippling polio virus," added Dr. Abdurrab.

Speaking on the eve of the first round, UNICEF Representative to Sudan Ted Chaiban underlined the need to reach every child, saying "If we are to ensure that no new cases of polio emerge in Sudan, vaccination teams must be able to access every community, every household, and every child aged under-five. That means ensuring that adequate stocks of vaccine are available, that the necessary logistical systems are in place, that vaccinators are properly trained on how to locate and register children being vaccinated, and that we press home the message that polio immunization is a priority for every family in Sudan."

Insecurity in some parts of the country remains a potential obstacle to the vaccination effort. UNICEF estimates that at least 200,000 children in the Darfur region may not have been reached by the last polio immunization campaign in November 2006, many because of constraints caused by insecurity. WHO and UNICEF Representatives have called for all parties to the ongoing conflict in Darfur to respect the humanitarian mandate of the vaccination teams, and guarantee their safe passage across the three states. "Whether consisting of NGO health workers or government vaccinators, these teams are working only to protect the health of children and to help eradicate polio in Sudan. Their work is purely humanitarian and we urge those who have influence over access in Darfur to commit themselves to the free movement of vaccinators. Their safety is of paramount importance."

Sudan's polio National Immunization Days are supported through financial contributions from a number of donors including the governments of Canada, Japan, the United States (USAID and OFDA), the Centers for Disease Control and Rotary International.