

## MEDIA RELEASE

### CONTINUED IMMUNIZATION EFFORTS AIM TO MAKE SUDAN “POLIO FREE”

**Khartoum, 12 February 2009.** Renewed efforts are being made to eradicate polio in Sudan, as the first mass immunization campaign of 2009, targeting 9 million children, gets underway early next week in the country.

During 2008, 26 cases of polio were reported in Sudan compared to none in 2006. Already in 2009, one new case has been confirmed in southern Sudan. Cross-border transmission of the poliovirus, exacerbated by frequent population movements, have presented a serious challenge to health agencies determined to wipe out the crippling virus.

“Despite the recent cases, the commitment to declare Sudan ‘polio free’ remains as strong as ever within the government, state-level health authorities, local communities and partner agencies,” said UNICEF Acting Representative in Sudan Dr. Iyabode Olusanmi. “Over the coming days that commitment will become truly measurable as over 6 million children in the north of Sudan, and some 3 million in Southern Sudan, are expected to receive polio vaccine.”

"The major challenge now is to stop the circulation of the wild poliovirus in Southern Sudan and to be prepared for any virus importation to the rest of the country," added Dr. Mohamed Abdur Rab, WHO Representative. "These activities, in conjunction with a strong routine immunization programmes and good quality surveillance activities are the strategies for the eradication of wild poliovirus."

The immunization drive is being coordinated by the Government of National Unity and the Government of Southern Sudan, through what have become known as National Immunization Days – three days of intense activity that witness thousands of vaccinators going door to door in every community to reach all children in the target age group of under-five year olds. Last year, more than 9 million children across the whole of Sudan were immunized against polio through such campaigns.

Nearly 38,000 vaccinators will be involved in the north of Sudan, which officially starts on Monday 16 February. The origin of some recent polio cases have been traced to neighbouring countries, as porous borders and population movement have helped carry the virus from one country to another. Increased efforts have been made to synchronize immunization campaigns across national borders, a technique that is known to reduce the risk of the virus circulating from place to place. A similar three day campaign will get underway in the states of Southern Sudan starting from 23 February.

“Tackling polio in Sudan requires a genuine sense of partnership, between agencies and between countries,” said Dr. Olusanmi. “Here in Sudan, UNICEF works closely with the government and in collaboration with the World Health Organization to provide funding and technical support for these campaigns, while donors such as the Governments of Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Japan, the United Kingdom, the United States, Rotary International and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have ensured that vital funds are available for vaccines and training the immunization teams.”

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The focus remains on improving vaccination coverage, not just through the National Immunization Days, but through routine immunization efforts. Last year, Sudan launched the Accelerated Child Survival Initiative which brings together a package of simple, cost-effective health services including polio and measles immunization, supported by training of local health workers, as part of a new approach to strengthening the delivery of integrated health services for women and children at community level.

Dr Abdur Rab reconfirmed the WHO commitment to sustain its support to Sudan's National Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) through joint planning, management, training, social mobilization, reporting, supervision, monitoring, vaccine supply and maintenance of cold chain equipments.

“By combining intensive campaigns with increased investment in routine health care for children we can make significant strides in tackling diseases such as polio, and contribute to notable reductions in child mortality,” said Dr. Oluşanmi. “We will continue these efforts tirelessly, until Sudan is free not only of polio but all preventable diseases that still claim too many young lives.”

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