

*Afghanistan's Polio Eradication Initiative continues operations amid ongoing instability in the country*



25 August 2021 – “Poliovirus circulation does not stop during conflicts, it does not stop during emergencies. If anything, it makes children and families even more vulnerable by adding a layer of risk”, says a Polio Provincial Officer from Balkh province.

Despite risks and challenges due to the recent insecurity, the polio programme is staying and delivering for the children of Afghanistan. Our 315 staff and more than 70 000 polio health workers across the country remain firm in their resolve to eradicate polio. Their work ensures that critical polio activities continue while adapting to the rapidly changing situation and carry on

even when hostility levels are high.

In 2021, one wild poliovirus type 1 (WPV1) and 43 circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2 (cVDPV2) cases have been confirmed in Afghanistan. All cases have been reported in areas of the country that have for years been inaccessible for door-to-door vaccination campaigns, which left at least 3 million children repeatedly deprived of polio vaccination. Population displacement brought about by the current situation could further impact the programme's access to children and increase immunity gaps against polio, triggering a rise in transmission. It is also feared that the mixing and movement of unvaccinated populations due to the upheaval faced by thousands of Afghans may spur polio transmission.

“We are working with all actors to ensure there are no delays or disruptions to polio vaccination campaigns and overall routine immunization. The gains of the past 20 years cannot be lost. Children need immunization now, they must not bear the brunt of conflict and instability. We are calling for unimpeded access to all children,” says Dr Dapeng Luo, WHO Representative in Afghanistan.

## **Pre-planning and resilience measures**

While the current situation is a challenge, it is by no means the first the polio programme has faced. Using its wealth of knowledge from many years of operating in complex environments, the programme has invested in robust, pre-emptive contingency planning to be able to adapt, change and continue delivering. Regular monitoring of the security situation has allowed for nimble decision-making.

The programme has moved swiftly to ensure the safety and security of its staff. Its international staff footprint has been significantly reduced and vulnerable national staff and their dependants have been temporarily relocated to Kabul. Flexible working arrangements and salary advances have been provided to cover urgent needs of staff and polio health workers, who are the backbone of polio operations.

Around 92% of polio staff remain at their field locations and working to maintain essential polio services, supported remotely by colleagues who have needed to relocate.



## Vaccination continues

Polio vaccinations are continuing through permanent transit teams in most regions and at cross-border sites, including Torkham and Friendship Gate (between Afghanistan and Pakistan).

After a brief pause, the National Emergency Operation Centre is back up and running, and undertaking planning needed to implement future campaigns. Discussions are ongoing with local authorities to safeguard the resumption of critical immunization activities across the country. The programme remains optimistic that polio vaccination campaigns planned for later this year can go ahead; however, is maintaining a flexible approach.

“The safety and security of staff and polio health workers is our top priority. Their commitment to ending polio is nothing short of inspirational. I stand ready to support their critical work in any way I can. I say this with absolute conviction: We WILL achieve a polio-free world,” said Dr Hamid Jafari, Director of Polio Eradication, WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region.

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