



The reviewers visited 76 districts in 25 of the country's 34 provinces, interviewing 899 people 20 September 2022 – For the last 2 decades, the prospect of sending 16 visiting polio experts out across the provinces of Afghanistan would have been impossible but from 6 to 19 June 2022, WHO Afghanistan's polio eradication programme did just that. Their mission? To review the country's polio surveillance system, assess its functionality at all levels and make specific recommendations for maintaining and improving surveillance quality.

“It was an extraordinary achievement by WHO Afghanistan's polio team. The logistic and administrative challenges alone were enormous,” said Dr Luo Dapeng, WHO Representative in Afghanistan. “Afghanistan is one of the last countries where polio is endemic and we must do all we can to stop this virus from infecting any more children.”

The review was necessary for several reasons one of which was to ascertain whether the sharp decline in the number of children paralysed by wild poliovirus in Afghanistan in the last 18 months was an accurate reflection of the reality on the ground. From 56 cases in 2020, the number dropped to 4 in 2021. So far this year, 2 children have been paralysed by the virus.

“It's important to show that the surveillance system has the strength and the ability to detect any

poliovirus circulation that may be happening,” said Dr Irfan Elahi Akbar, Polio Team Leader at WHO Afghanistan. “Because if we don’t detect and investigate cases quickly and respond, more and more children will be paralysed.’

The last international surveillance review team visited in 2016, meaning a review was also overdue. Insecurity and the polio programme’s lack of access to much of the country meant the small team could visit just a handful of locations including the cities of Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, Jalalabad, Mazar-e-sharif and Kunduz.

This time round, the reviewers visited 76 districts in 25 of the country’s 34 provinces, interviewing 899 people, among them volunteers who form part of the community surveillance network made up of more than 46 000 people, including pharmacists, community health workers, faith healers, nurses, imams, and bone fixers.

Following a desk review of the system late last year in which the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) partners Hub in Amman analysed the existing country data, a physical visit was necessary in order to verify the findings and get as accurate a picture as possible of the surveillance system.

“A surveillance review is a very rigorous process that involves examining records and documents of cases of acute flaccid paralysis [AFP, a sign that polio may be present] in children, talking to patients and their families, assessing the knowledge of the many people involved in the surveillance network, scanning hospital records, checking, and rechecking data,” said Dr Khushhal Khan Zaman, who oversees polio surveillance for WHO Afghanistan.

The ultimate goal of Afghanistan’s polio eradication programme is for the country to be certified polio free, a long and meticulous process that relies on documentary evidence to show there has been no wild poliovirus transmission for a period of at least 3 years since the last reported case.

