



Cairo/Amman, 7 April 2023 – A measles and polio vaccination campaign will launch tomorrow across northwest Syria to protect some 800 000 children under 5 years of age from 2 deadly but preventable diseases.

The vaccination drive, supported by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), in coordination with local health workers, the Syria Immunization Group and Gavi - the Vaccine Alliance, launches just over 2 months since the earthquakes that devastated northern Syria and southern Türkiye.

“Protecting the youngest and most vulnerable children from potential disease outbreaks will save lives. We know from years of experience that vaccines work,” said UNICEF Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa, Adele Khodr.

Increasing routine immunization rates among children is a priority in an area where the earthquakes partially or totally destroyed 67 health facilities; health systems in the affected areas had already been severely weakened by 12 years of conflict. Close to 100 000 people have also been newly displaced by the earthquakes and are living in overcrowded camps, which have substandard water, sanitation and hygiene systems.

“The earthquakes have already disrupted so many lives and livelihoods, but by acting once again on our regional vision of Health for All by All with our partners, and vaccinating children under the age of 5, we can prevent a secondary disaster in the form of a disease outbreak,” said Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean.

The measles and polio vaccine will target children in the 12 most earthquake-impacted and at-risk districts across Idlib and northern Aleppo. Measles and polio can spread fast, with measles potentially causing serious respiratory illness, and polio leading to paralysis, both of which can result in death.

“It is critical to continue these immunization efforts, especially in such challenging humanitarian contexts. This work follows the highly successful cholera vaccination campaign that reached nearly 1.7 million people last month,” added Khodr.

Heading northwest Syria operations run from the WHO Gaziantep office in Türkiye, Dr Idris Elrasheed said that he was “in awe of the 3000 health workers who will work in the community in the coming 10 days despite being themselves impacted by the earthquakes. They have lost relatives and homes, and yet remain fully committed to serving their communities – this is why I have nothing but respect for their humanity and professionalism.”

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