

24 August 2023 – To address gaps in existing national systems for timely detection and response to a measles/rubella outbreak in priority countries, the WHO Regional Office conducted a measles/rubella outbreak simulation exercise and outbreak investigation capacity-building workshop in Cairo on 20–24 August 2023.

The priority countries (Afghanistan, Djibouti, Iraq, Islamic Republic of Iran, Lebanon, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen) have all reported active outbreaks in the past 2 years. Most of these countries are characterized as fragile, conflict-affected, experiencing natural and manmade disasters, housing large populations of internally displaced persons or refugees and having weak health systems.

Disruption in immunization and health services in general, population movement, restricted access and emigration of health workers has resulted in a huge immunity gap and led to increased risk outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases, especially measles. Weak disease surveillance, inadequate preparedness, poor coordination, late detection and poor quality response activities are the main reasons for the continuation of large-scale outbreaks and resulting mortality and morbidity.

The workshop was attended by participants and officials from ministries of health of the priority countries from 2 WHO regions, and WHO and UNICEF staff.

The objectives of the workshop and simulation exercise are to:

describe the basic demographic, epidemiological aspects, definition and nature of measles/rubella outbreaks;

establish indicators for event-based surveillance systems to detect public health threats;

perform descriptive analysis of surveillance data, monitor disease trends and demonstrate how they are utilized to monitor and detect outbreaks;

detail the steps of outbreak investigation;

ensure systems are established to enable a rapid, effective response to outbreaks;

discuss outbreak management and coordination structures and standard operating procedures.

The workshop aimed to ensure that countries will be better prepared to timely detect, investigate and effectively respond to measles/rubella outbreaks and detect and confirm cases to ensure proper case management and implement appropriate public health measures to control further transmission. National programmes need staff equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to monitor, detect early, investigate adequately and effectively respond to all vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks to reduce morbidity and mortality associated with vaccine-preventable diseases in the Region.

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