

UN agency declares Somalia polio-free

The United Nations health agency announced that polio has been eradicated in Somalia, thanks to the efforts of some 10,000 volunteers and health workers across the Horn of Africa.

“Against a backdrop of widespread conflict, large population movements and a dearth of functioning government infrastructure, the transmission of the polio virus in the country has been successfully stopped,” the UN World Health Organisation (WHO) said on Tuesday.

Somalia has not reported a case of polio since March 2007.

This is a major landmark in the intensified eradication effort launched last year to eradicate the disease in a few remaining countries, according to the Global Polio Eradication initiative.

The initiative is spearheaded by national governments, WHO, Rotary International, the United States Centres for Disease Control and Prevention and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF).

Innovative approaches tailored to conflict areas are being credited for stopping polio, which can cause lifelong paralysis, in the country.

Some of these approaches include increased community involvement and the effective use of monovalent vaccines to immunise children in insecure areas with several doses, within a short period of time.

More than 10,000 Somali volunteers and health workers repeatedly vaccinated more than 1.8 million children under the age of five by visiting every household in every settlement multiple times.

“Somalia shows that when communities are engaged, children everywhere can be reached,” stated Dr Maritel Costales, Senior Health Advisor, UNICEF New York.

Somalia, which has not had a functioning national government in almost two decades, had already eradicated the disease in 2002 but became re-infected in 2005 by a polio virus originating in Nigeria.

“This truly historic achievement shows that polio can be eradicated everywhere, even in the most challenging and difficult settings,” said Dr Hussein A Gezairy, Regional Director for WHO's Office for the Eastern Mediterranean.

Following a 20-year global effort, the disease has been stopped nearly everywhere in the world with the exception of the remaining four polio-endemic countries - Afghanistan, India, Nigeria and Pakistan.

Stable funding is critical to continuing global eradication efforts. Some \$525 million is urgently needed for 2008/2009 to fight the disease in the remaining endemic areas and protect children in high-risk polio-free areas.

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