

How to meet 111 million children in four days

West and Central Africa Polio Campaign Enters Decisive Phase

Brazzaville/Dakar, 21 March 2012 -- Health Ministries, UN agencies and communities are uniting with tens of thousands of volunteer immunizers over four days to go door-to-door and hut to hut for a vaccination campaign against polio in 20 African countries starting on 23 March.

Across West and Central Africa, over 111.1 million children below the age of five are expected to be vaccinated through this campaign. Nigeria, the only polio endemic country in Africa, aims to get two drops of the oral vaccine into the mouths of 57.7 million children. Nineteen other countries, which are at risk of re-infection, are stepping up efforts to reach nearly 53.3 million children.

This gigantic exercise represents a dramatic effort of will by governments and partners, and relies on hundreds of thousands of health workers and volunteers who will be administering the drops to all children under the age of five, irrespective of their previous immunization status.

While Nigeria will conduct its round from 31 March to 3 April due to operational reasons, the campaign will be conducted from 23 to 26 March in Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Central African Republic, Niger, Cameroun, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.

"The upcoming campaign in West and Central Africa will aim to cover all children, immunized or not, in order to boost their protection levels and deprive the virus of the fertile seedbed on which it depends for survival", says World Health Organization Regional Director for Africa, Dr Luis Sambo. "This exercise should bring us closer to reaching our goal of interrupting wild polio virus transmission in our region in 2012."

The risk of importation of polio virus in West Africa persists given the endemic nature of transmission in Nigeria; the sub-optimal population immunity across the sub-region; the intensive cross-border population movements; and the resurgence of poliovirus type 3 in 2011 in Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, and Niger.

Demonstrating high level commitment and political will, the President of Nigeria on 1 March inaugurated a Presidential Task Force to deal with the polio emergency and pledged US\$30 million each year for the next two years for polio eradication activities.

"Either we succeed in eradicating polio today or this initiative will falter tomorrow and polio will explode. We will then see millions of children being paralyzed by this disease", said David Gressly, UNICEF Regional Director for West and Central Africa.

"Since the beginning of the fight against polio, we have prevented over 5 million children from becoming paralyzed across the world. Now countries from West and Central Africa are mobilizing more vaccinators and volunteers than ever before. Making Africa polio free is within our reach. We cannot miss this historical opportunity. Is this last push going to be easy? No. Can we achieve it? Yes. Together we need to knock on all the doors to reach every last child wherever he or she is. We never again want to see children crippled by this disease", added David Gressly.

Mr. Ambroise Tshimbalanga Kasongo, chair of Rotary International's African PolioPlus Committee, said that Rotary has committed funds to help make these critical activities possible, and he called on other donors to stay the course by filling the current \$405 million funding gap for 2012.

"This year's progress in India has proven what is possible when we focus on the task at hand," he said. "In Africa, the end of polio is in sight, but we still have hard work ahead. Failure is not an option."

To reduce the risk and consequences of importation of poliovirus, OPV coverage must be sustained at more than 90% coverage for a number of years. However, an assessment conducted by WHO in February 2012 shows routine immunization gaps in most West African countries, only five of which have attained or maintained over 90% coverage since 2008. That is why these upcoming immunization campaigns are so critical to further boost population immunity levels.

The Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) is spearheaded by national governments, WHO, Rotary International, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and UNICEF, and supported by Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF).

Since 1988 (the year the GPEI was launched), the incidence of polio has been reduced by more than 99 percent. At the time, more than 350,000 children were paralyzed every year in more than 125 endemic countries. In 2011, 650 cases have been reported worldwide. Only three countries remain endemic: Afghanistan, Nigeria and Pakistan.

About WHO

WHO is the directing and coordinating authority on international health within the United Nations system. With people working in over 147 countries, WHO is responsible for providing leadership on global health matters, shaping the health research agenda, setting norms and standards, articulating evidence-based policy options, providing technical support to countries and monitoring and assessing health trends. In addition to medical doctors, public health specialists, scientists and epidemiologists, WHO staff include people trained to manage administrative, financial, and information systems, as well as experts in the fields of health statistics, economics and emergency relief, working together to ensure better health for all. For more information, please visit: www.who.int

About UNICEF

UNICEF works in 190 countries and territories to help children survive and thrive, from early childhood through adolescence. The world's largest provider of vaccines for developing countries, UNICEF supports child health and nutrition, good water and sanitation, quality basic education for all boys and girls, and the protection of children from violence, exploitation, and AIDS. UNICEF is funded entirely by the voluntary contributions of individuals, businesses, foundations and governments. For more information about UNICEF and its work visit: www.unicef.org

Media Contacts

For more information, please contact:

Samuel Ajibola, WHO Regional Office for Africa, Brazzaville, Tel: +47-241-39378 E-mail: ajibolas@afro.who.int

Laurent Duvillier, UNICEF Regional Office for West and Central Africa, Mobile + 221 77 637 66 04;
E-mail: lduvillier@unicef.org