



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Address by

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to the

ISLAMIC SCHOLARS' CONSULTATION

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Your Excellencies from across the Islamic World, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to Cairo for this extremely important and timely consultation. We are here today because we stand at a historic crossroad. For the second time only, humankind is poised to completely eradicate a disease from the face of the earth. I look to you here today for your guidance, advice and ongoing support in helping us achieve this historic goal.

Polio has been with us through recorded history, as evidenced in the chronicles of ancient Egypt from 3500 years ago. This disease once paralysed an estimated 1000 children daily throughout the world. But with the development of a very safe vaccine, and worldwide efforts to sure that the vaccine reaches every child, we have succeeded in bringing polio to the brink of eradication – a 99.9% decline has already been achieved.

The Global Polio Eradication Initiative, launched by the health ministers during the World Health Assembly of 1988, has been successful in stopping the transmission of this crippling disease in all but three countries: Afghanistan, Nigeria and Pakistan.

Through this effort, more than 10 billion doses of oral poliovaccine (OPV) have been administered to more than 2.5 billion children worldwide, almost a quarter of whom are Muslim children. More than 10 million people are walking today who would otherwise have been paralysed. In addition, over 1.5 million childhood deaths have been prevented through the administration of vitamin A during polio campaigns.

In January 2012, India passed the milestone of one year without a single case. Long considered the most challenging country to eradicate polio, India's success has been overshadowed by case numbers that doubled in 2011 in the three remaining polio-endemic countries: Afghanistan, Nigeria and Pakistan.

While India demonstrates the potential for success in even the most difficult conditions, recent outbreaks in countries that had stopped polio, such as China, Congo and Tajikistan, remind us of the deadly consequences of failing to complete polio eradication. Concerned and alarmed by consequences of failure after so much has been achieved, the World Health Assembly declared in May 2012 the completion of polio eradication a programmatic emergency for global public health and called for a marked increase in the intensity of eradication activities in the high-risk areas of the endemic countries.

This sparked a series of emergency actions taken by the Global Polio Eradication Initiative partners and national governments. Thanks to intensified work last year, 2012 witnessed the lowest number of polio cases in children than at any previous time in history. Globally, 222 children were reported to suffer from polio, a 66% decline compared with 2011.

In 2 of the endemic countries, Pakistan and Afghanistan, 65% and 42% fewer children respectively suffered from polio as compared with 2011. In Nigeria, however, the number of children affected by polio doubled in 2011, though by the end of 2012 there was strong evidence of improved programme performance in the historically worst-performing areas.

Why are we so concerned that polio still persists in these three Islamic countries? Simply, because children in these countries also have the right to be protected against this crippling disease, because we know that polio travels long distances very easily, and that if polio survives anywhere, it threatens children everywhere.

This brings me to why we are gathered here today. We are here to explore ways that will help end polio in the three remaining Islamic countries and thereby the world. The three remaining countries face a complex web of increasing security challenges, terrorism and insurgency, which exploit religious sentiments and weaken community trust, creating a climate of fear. Ultimately, this results in fewer children being vaccinated and more cases of polio paralysis.

Each of the countries that stopped indigenous wild poliovirus transmission had to overcome similar challenges and to varying degrees, involving poverty, poor infrastructure, insecurity, conflict, religious or social conservatism, or rumours about vaccine safety.

Except in three countries, Muslim communities and countries globally have eradicated polio, achieved through the concerted application of eradication strategies, administration of vaccine, and financial and political support throughout the Islamic world.

Eminent Islamic scholars from all schools of thought have been issuing edicts (*fatawa*) in support of polio immunization in the light of Islamic teachings. Political and health leadership in Muslim countries have successfully promoted vaccination and polio eradication. However, in the current environment of fear and confusion being spread by certain elements, I reach out to our eminent Islamic scholars to join in demonstrating a more visible and consistent support, to put their weight behind the efforts to eradicate this disease and protect the children of the *ummah*.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Ignorance, neglect and political motivations are jeopardizing success and standing in the way of eradication. Those with political objectives portray polio eradication as a Western ploy, an image that has unfortunately taken root in some areas of the three remaining countries. This misinformation is often couched as religious in nature.

There is an urgent need to counter this false propaganda by heightening the visibility of the solidarity among Islamic scholars and political and traditional tribal and community leadership throughout the Muslim *ummah*. We need a united, clear and knowledgeable voice that calls for the protection of all children from polio paralysis by using a safe and reliable vaccine. A voice that clearly counters the false propaganda about the nature of the vaccine, a question that was irrevocably put to rest by Islamic jurisprudence in a detailed *fatwa* in 2004, which clearly stated that oral poliovaccine is lawful (*halal*) and an obligation for all Muslim parents in order to ensure the protection of their children against the disease.

The recent killings of local health workers in Pakistan and Nigeria have added an unprecedented dimension to the violence that terrorists are perpetuating. These local workers were killed because they were trying to help protect Muslim children in these high-risk communities.

This grave and unique situation calls for our religious and political leadership to take ownership of the polio programme and to ensure that all Muslim children are provided

protection against this crippling disease so that no Muslim child will ever have to live a life of disability and hardship because of polio.

Here, I would like to quote from the communique issued after the recently held Summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Cairo: “We resolve to accord high priority to the health sector and take steps for the mainstreaming of health issues in national planning. We reaffirm that preserving the well-being and physical health of children is the duty of every parent and society as prescribed by Islam. We therefore appeal to the religious scholars and leaders to support the polio eradication campaign and encourage the people to respond positively to it”. We look forward to stronger collaboration and we expect stronger support from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in addressing this challenge to the Islamic world.

I seek your ideas and advice, as scholars, to ensure that all Muslim children are protected against this crippling disease and a strong message is sent to those who seize every opportunity to interfere with this basic right of Muslim children, that by continuing to do so, they are harming the lives and future of Muslim children in these countries and around the globe.

We need your wisdom to guide us through these challenging times and your advice on the way forward. We want to hear your views on whether you feel there is a need to re-profile the programme. Would it help if the programme is distanced from the West? Would it be preferable if it is seen and perceived as being owned and supported by the entire *ummah*? Will a neutral interface delivering the services in the highest risk areas of these countries help? How can we work together?

Over the next day, I will invite your questions, your concerns and your ideas as we brainstorm together and debate the best strategies to build Islamic support to and buy-in of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative to ensure the protection of Muslim children and contribute to a lasting polio-free world.

I would like to thank all of you for taking time from your very busy schedules and joining us in finding ways of protecting the *ummah*'s children from a disabling scourge that we can and should eliminate from the lives of our children and for generations to come.

I wish you a very productive meeting and a pleasant stay in Cairo.