



**REGIONAL COMMITTEE FOR THE
EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN**

1 October 2014

**Sixty-first Session
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POLIO ERADICATION IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

Objectives of the event

The objective of the event is to discuss collective actions which need to be taken to reduce the threat of the spread of wild poliovirus to Member States and to finally eradicate the disease from all countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. Transmission of wild poliovirus in the Region is currently the greatest threat to the achievement of global polio eradication.

Background

As of 21 September, of the 201 cases of polio reported in 2014 globally, 184 (91%) are from countries of the Region. Pakistan alone accounts for over 80% of the global disease burden (166 cases), and Afghanistan (10 cases), Somalia (5 cases), Iraq (2 cases), and the Syrian Arab Republic (1 case) have all reported polio in 2014.

In October 2013, the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean at its 60th session declared the international spread of poliovirus an emergency for all Member States of the Region. On 5 May 2014, the International Health Regulations (IHR 2005) Emergency Committee, established by request of Member States during the 134th session of the World Health Organization (WHO) Executive Board, issued its recommendations on recent developments. Based on the recommendations of the Emergency Committee, WHO has declared the international spread of wild poliovirus a public health emergency of international concern.

Importance of accelerating polio eradication in the Region

The Region is in the midst of the 'high' season for poliovirus transmission, which typically runs from May to November. This is reflected in the rising transmission of wild poliovirus in Pakistan, with increasing case numbers during the months of the high transmission season. Wild poliovirus has so far remained largely confined to known endemic areas where there are issues of access to children with immunization. However, there is a significant risk of the spread of virus to other parts of Pakistan, and to other countries in the Region.

Afghanistan continues to report transmission, both indigenous transmission in the southern Region, and regular cross-border transmission from Pakistan in eastern and south-eastern regions. There remain issues of access to children that hamper eradication efforts in both the southern and eastern regions.

Among the re-infected countries, the outbreak in Somalia is still ongoing although case numbers are substantially reduced in 2014 (5 cases), compared to 2013 (197 cases). Transmission persists in remote and pastoral communities and there remains a continued risk of spread and continuation of the outbreak due to the large number of children who are not accessible for immunization in the south-central zone of Somalia.

In the Middle East, multiple mass vaccination campaigns across the Region have had a significant impact on the outbreak in Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq, with the most recent case in Syria from January 2014, and in Iraq from April. However, conflict and large-scale population movements pose continued risks for the survival of poliovirus transmission and for spread.

A coordinated international effort is needed to address the risk of spread of poliovirus in the Region, and to complete the task of eradicating polio.

Challenges in the Region

The most significant challenges are posed by: 1) constraints to accessing all children with vaccine, whether due to bans on immunization, insecurity, or conflict; 2) achieving high quality of immunization and surveillance work through effective accountability for government at all levels, and partners; 3) achieving and maintaining the highest possible level of political and community commitment to eradicating polio; and 4) securing the resources necessary to take the Region to zero polio.

Expected outcomes of the meeting

The meeting will: 1) inform Member States of actions taken since the 2013 60th Regional Committee resolution EM/RC60/R.3 “Escalating poliomyelitis emergency in the Eastern Mediterranean Region”; 2) provide an opportunity for the delegation from Pakistan to update Member States on plans for the coming low transmission season; 3) provide a forum for discussion of collective actions that need to be taken to reduce the risk of spread of wild poliovirus and to finally eradicate polio from the Region.

Conclusion

The continued transmission of wild poliovirus in countries of the Region constitutes the major risk to the achievement of global polio eradication. It is a collective problem requiring collective solutions. A coordinated international effort by Member States, WHO and partners is needed to eliminate the risk of polio forever.