

Over the next few months, the polio programme anticipates two important developments. Thanks to India's success against polio, the South-East Asia Regional Certification Commission will meet next week to evaluate whether the entire region can be declared polio-free – a major milestone for the global polio programme and the region's 1.8 billion people. Later this spring, a group of senior public health experts will convene to assess and advise the WHO Director-General on benefits of potential measures to reduce the risk of international spread of polio, including benefits of recommendations requiring vaccination of travelers from polio-infected areas to protect progress.

Meanwhile, the programme continues to drive progress against the Polio Eradication and Endgame Strategic Plan to end polio by 2018. Last month, UNICEF concluded a tender process that will make affordable inactivated polio vaccine (IPV) available to support country introductions, an important step toward the transition from oral polio vaccine (OPV) to IPV called for in the Plan. Mass immunization campaigns continue across the Middle East, aiming to reach 10 million children this month.

National and local governments are employing innovative approaches to reach more children in inaccessible areas. In Peshawar, Pakistan, for example, a door-to-door health initiative called "Justice for Health" is providing children with nine essential vaccines and health services, including the polio vaccine.

On the Horizon: March/April 2014

Expert committee to advise on potential recommendations for reducing the risk of international spread of polio

The Director-General of the WHO will convene an independent expert committee next month under the [International Health Regulations](#) to advise on potential measures that would reduce the risk of international spread of polio. One of the measures the committee will consider is more stringent recommendations on vaccination of travelers from polio-infected areas. The International Health Regulations are an international agreement that aims to prevent, detect and respond to disease outbreaks. Read more [here](#).

SEARO polio-free certification

On 27 March, the Regional Certification Commission of the South-East Asia Region will evaluate whether the entire region, which includes India, can be certified polio-free. This region of 11 countries is home to more than 1.8 billion people; with its certification, the proportion of the world's people living in polio-free regions will jump from 52% to nearly 80%. Read more [here](#).

With polio transmission interrupted, many polio-free countries are now able to focus attention and resources on other health priorities, often leveraging the polio infrastructure. For example, India's National Polio Surveillance Project has improved cold chain capabilities and routine immunization monitoring, planning and coverage. This has helped the country introduce Hepatitis B and Japanese encephalitis vaccines into its immunization programme, and contributed to a reduction in measles mortality.

Polio in Numbers

Global Total: 37 (11) ↑
Global WPV1: 37 (11) ↑
Global WPV3: 0 (0)

Endemic: 33 (11) ↑
Afghanistan: 3 (1) ↑
Nigeria: 1 (5) ↓
Pakistan: 29 (5) ↑

Importation: 4 (0) ↑
of infected countries: 5 (3) ↑
of infected districts: 14 (11) ↑

As of 19 March 2014. Numbers in brackets represent data this time in 2013.

[Current case map](#)

Progress Against the Plan

Strengthening Routine Immunization and Introducing IPV

UNICEF to make affordable IPV available for country introductions

UNICEF announced on 27 February that the price of IPV will drop to as little as €0.75 (about US\$1 at current exchange rates) for 73 low-income countries supported by the GAVI Alliance, and approximately €1.40-2.40 (about US\$2.04-3.28 at current exchange rates) for middle-income countries. Affordable IPV is a critical step toward achieving the Plan's ambitious IPV introduction timeline – necessary preparation for the phased removal of OPV – and to securing a polio-free world. Read more [here](#).



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Interrupting Poliovirus Transmission

Nigeria

Nigeria has reported only one case of polio so far in 2014, and only six between September-December 2013 – the bulk of the traditional “high season” for polio. Commitment from all levels and a series of innovative strategies are dramatically increasing the number of children reached with vaccines: between February 2013 and January 2014, the number of highest-risk districts meeting targets for vaccine coverage jumped from 51% to more than 80%. Read more below.

Afghanistan

Kabul recorded one case of polio in January, the first in the Afghan capital in more than 12 years. The case was traced to strains circulating in Pakistan – a reminder that polio anywhere poses a risk to children everywhere. Afghan officials immediately launched vaccination campaigns, reaching more than 70,000 children. The country has made tremendous progress toward eradication, but remains vulnerable to cross-border transmission from Pakistan.

Pakistan

Pakistan's growing case load amid a general climate of violence and terrorism continues to raise concerns. This climate has kept at least 280,000 children unvaccinated, including in North Waziristan which is now home to 22 of Pakistan's 29 polio cases to date in 2014.

Local leaders are working to overcome these challenges. In January, the government of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province launched Sehat ka Insaf (Justice for Health), an initiative to deliver door-to-door immunization and health education services, including the polio vaccine, in Peshawar – KP's capital city and the engine of Pakistan's polio transmission. In the latest round, the initiative reached more than 600,000 children.

Middle East

Since October 2013, there have been 25 cases reported in Syria by the government, with an additional 12 cases confirmed in contested areas of the country. While monitoring data suggests that vaccine coverage rates exceed 80% in all but two governorates, there are still children who continue to miss vaccinations, particularly in access-compromised areas. In January, a fourth round of National Immunization Days (NIDs) helped reach children in [hard-to-access](#) areas.

This month, international and local partners worked with national governments [to launch](#) mass immunization campaigns aiming to reach 10 million children in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, as part of a coordinated effort to vaccinate 22 million children repeatedly across the region over six months.



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Central Africa

On 17 March, the WHO confirmed three new polio cases in Cameroon. Cameroon had already conducted four nationwide immunization campaigns since October, when the last case was reported. The programme is planning additional emergency response activities, with nationwide campaigns now scheduled for April, May and June. Read more [here](#).

Another polio case was reported this week in Equatorial Guinea, close to the border of Cameroon and linked to the virus transmission in Cameroon. Outbreak response activities are currently being planned, including campaigns in early April.

Expert Spotlight: Dr Oyewale Tomori, Chairman of Nigeria's Expert Review Committee on Polio Eradication



courtesy of Dr Tomori

In an interview, Dr Tomori described the innovative strategies behind Nigeria's recent progress against polio, and the challenges that lie ahead:

“We must not allow the 2015 election to set Nigeria back in the polio eradication race... We must engage the press, civil society organizations, parents and academics to call governments' attention to health in general and polio eradication in particular.”

Dr. Tomori adds that the benefits of eradication extend beyond polio: “The latest and greatest beneficiary of the polio activities in Nigeria is routine immunization (RI). The polio programme recognized that ending polio and strengthening immunization went hand in hand, and in 2012 made serious efforts to ensure that eradication programmes enhance RI. Today, the country is reaping the benefits of high RI coverage, evident in the much reduced number of polio cases.”

“We are so close to victory.”

[Read Dr Tomori's full Q&A](#)