

Dear Colleagues,

Before I share this month's updates, I would like to extend my sincere condolences to the family and close colleagues of Dr. Mahmoud M. Fikri, World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean Region, who passed away this month. I admired his dedication to advancing public health and his work to drive progress against polio in Syria, Afghanistan and Pakistan. He will be dearly missed.

October Updates

Early in October, I met with a group of polio partners in Dubai to review strategies for stopping polio transmission in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the only countries that have reported cases of wild polio this year. The meeting, hosted by the Regional Directors of WHO and UNICEF and attended by representatives from the Afghanistan and Pakistan government, spotlighted the remaining challenges to eliminating the disease and the national plans to overcome these barriers. For this month's letter, I'd like to share an update on the steps being taken to stop polio transmission in Pakistan and Afghanistan and, as highlighted on World Polio Day on October 24, commemorate the partners and unsung heroes working tirelessly to achieve polio eradication in these and other countries.

Strategies to end polio in Pakistan and Afghanistan

Thanks to strong political leadership and improved quality of vaccination campaigns, Pakistan and Afghanistan have made significant progress against polio in the last year, with record low numbers of cases so far in 2017. Still, several obstacles stand in the way of stamping out the disease. Improved disease surveillance systems indicate that the poliovirus continues to circulate in the environment, with 16% of environmental samples in Pakistan and 5% of samples from Afghanistan testing positive for the virus. Moreover, the two countries remain home to large, high-risk mobile populations, complicating efforts to reach every child with vaccines.



Reaching high-risk mobile populations is key to ending polio in Pakistan and Afghanistan.
WHO Afghanistan / S. Ramo

At the meeting in Dubai, partners discussed the National Emergency Action Plans of Pakistan and Afghanistan, which outline strategies to address these challenges. In response to ongoing circulation of the virus, both countries have planned **multiple national and subnational immunization days** over the next few months. For example, Pakistan will hold monthly, large-scale polio vaccination campaigns starting next month through May 2018, with each aiming to reach between 10 and 37 million children.

Specific plans have also been crafted to **protect migrant populations**, who are at greater risk of missing vaccination rounds and spreading polio to other areas. To supplement the efforts of permanent transit teams who already vaccinate millions of children at highway checkpoints, railway stations and other transit points, national teams will include additional detail on mobile groups in their microplans. Both countries remain committed to improving cross-border coordination of immunization activities, which is

key to ensuring that children in migrant populations who regularly move across the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier are reached by vaccination teams.

Celebrating partnerships and unsung heroes

With historically low case counts and promising signs of progress, we are at a pivotal moment in the effort to eradicate the disease, making the kind of partner coordination and close communication displayed in Dubai more important than ever before.



Rotary International's World Polio Day Event at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, October 24, 2017

The strength of the global polio partnership was showcased through an incredible number of activities and events held around the world to mark World Polio Day on October 24, focused on honoring the “unsung heroes” of polio eradication. The [annual Rotary International World Polio Day event](#) was hosted at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation headquarters this year, where polio survivors, advocates and other partners shared inspiring messages with a worldwide audience. The event reminded me once again of the dedication and tenacity of this remarkable coalition, including the countless health workers and volunteers working to find and eliminate every last trace of the poliovirus.

While challenges remain to stop transmission in Pakistan and Afghanistan, October's events in Dubai and Seattle demonstrated stakeholders' commitments to overcome these final barriers and protect every child.

Thank you,

Chris Elias
President, Global Development, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
Chairman, Polio Oversight Board