

March 3, 2017

Dear Colleagues,

I'm honored that the Polio Oversight Board (POB) has asked me to serve once again as its chair. I found my experience as POB chair from 2013 to 2015 incredibly rewarding, and I'm excited to be working with you again in this important role.

I want to thank Dr. Tom Frieden for his incredible leadership and service over the past two years. We're at a critical moment in the final push to eradicate polio, and one of the keys to our success will be effective communication and coordination among partners. That's why I will follow Dr. Frieden's precedent by sharing regular updates on progress and challenges.



Only Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nigeria have reported wild polio cases in the past year, and each have implemented new approaches that are proving effective. Last year we saw the lowest case count in history, but we all know that getting to zero won't be easy. Thanks to your collective efforts, we have tremendous momentum, but we have more work to do before we can celebrate.

Earlier this month, we received reports on the first three children paralyzed by polio in 2017—two in Afghanistan and one in Pakistan. Most of last year's 33 cases in those two countries occurred in extremely difficult areas, where significant cross-border population movement, insecurity and active fighting have hampered the ability of vaccinators to reach children. I was encouraged by the meeting Bill Gates and I had recently with President Ghani of Afghanistan. He was keenly aware of the impact of insecurity on the polio program, but firmly committed to finishing polio for the good of the children of Afghanistan, and is planning to message this strongly to all governors.

To end transmission for good, Afghanistan and Pakistan will need to continue their efforts to:

- **Strengthen environmental surveillance.** Both countries have taken steps to expand the number of environmental surveillance sites, including in high-risk, security-compromised areas. Recent environmental samples have shown that the virus continues to circulate, reinforcing the need to ensure these systems are detecting the virus in a timely way.
- **Prioritize reaching children traveling across the border.** Hundreds of thousands of children are immunized at nearly 20 sites set up along the Afghanistan/Pakistan border. The vaccinators at these sites will be essential to stop the spread of the virus between the two countries.
- **Implement high-quality vaccination campaigns.** Pakistan and Afghanistan are planning monthly large-scale vaccination campaigns through the end of May during the traditional "low season" for polio transmission, providing the best opportunity to stop the disease. In addition to these large-scale campaigns, targeted campaigns are underway to respond to outbreaks and protect children in high risk groups, including nomadic populations.

In addition to the work in Pakistan and Afghanistan, 2017 is also critical for Nigeria and its bordering countries. I returned just a few days ago from Brazzaville, where I checked in with the WHO and UNICEF regional directors; the WHO and UNICEF country representatives from the four Lake Chad Basin countries (Nigeria, Chad, Niger, Cameroon) and Central African Republic; and representatives from Rotary and CDC. This was an important opportunity to learn about, and help solve, challenges that remain in stopping transmission and ensuring good surveillance. The country and regional teams agreed on division of responsibilities for implementation of the program and key action points to improve surveillance and immunity. The commitment I saw and heard from the GPEI partners in these key countries was impressive but there is still important work to get done there.

While we stay diligent in ending transmission, we'll also need to make progress on the other objectives of the GPEI's Endgame and Strategic Plan. This means ensuring the successful global introduction of the inactivated polio vaccine (IPV) and, ultimately, phasing out the oral polio vaccine; laying the groundwork to certify the eradication and containment of all wild polioviruses; and beginning to transition polio assets into ongoing public health programs.

I'm more optimistic than ever that we'll soon see the end of polio transmission worldwide and deliver on our pledge to protect and improve the lives of vulnerable children everywhere. The program will continue to assess, develop and implement the necessary solutions to respond to our challenges.

Thank you,



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

Key GPEI Events/Meetings in March:

- Finance Management Team meeting – March 13-14, New York
- Polio Advocacy and Communications Team meeting – March 14-15, New York
- Pakistan Technical Advisory Group meeting – March 30-31, Islamabad
- Polio Partners Group (PPG) Transition Planning and Implementation Workshop – March 31, Geneva