

22 June 2018

Dear Colleagues,

Last month, I was honored to join global leaders in Geneva for the [71<sup>st</sup> World Health Assembly](#) (WHA), where delegates explored ways to advance our collective health priorities. Polio eradication was the focus of several WHA committee sessions, and I also had the opportunity to meet separately with stakeholders from endemic and at-risk countries. In this letter, I'd like to provide an update on the conversations that took place in Geneva, including discussions on polio eradication, transition and containment.

### **A Polio-Free Vision at #WHA71**

At a session on 24 May, member states approved the [World Health Organization's \(WHO\) Strategic Action Plan on Polio Transition](#). This strategy outlines steps needed to sustain a polio-free world while protecting routine immunization systems, disease surveillance networks and emergency preparedness capacities. The Post-Certification Strategy was noted and the final version in all six United Nations languages can be found on the [GPEI website](#). Representatives raised several important questions about this plan, including on the need for more information on transition financing and the future stewards of these activities – topics that will continue to be discussed throughout the year.



*Delegates at the 71<sup>st</sup> World Health Assembly discussed several topics related to polio eradication, including transition and containment.*

WHO / A. Tardy

The next day, the assembly adopted a [resolution on containment](#) – in other words, the actions needed to prevent the escape of polioviruses from any designated and certified facility after the disease is eradicated. Dr. Ranieri Guerra, WHO's Assistant Director-General for Special Initiatives, lauded the leadership of countries like Spain – which has already safely destroyed all of its stores of the virus – and underscored WHO's willingness to assist other nations as they work to minimize risk of reintroducing polio into the environment. By establishing deadlines related to national oversight and facility certification, and with the formal initiation of wild type 1 and 3 containment globally, the resolution will help align containment with the timeline of global eradication certification.

Importantly, during discussions on both transition and containment, delegates repeatedly stressed the importance of maintaining focus on our number one priority: getting to zero cases of polio globally. Member states reaffirmed their commitment to build on progress from 2017 – when the world recorded only 22 cases of wild polio – and called for sustained political will until the disease is ended for good. As a representative from Canada told the assembly on 25 May, "Continued high-level focus on eradication ... will be needed more than ever to keep the momentum during this last, most-challenging phase."

### **Stopping All Types of Polio – for Good**

Throughout WHA, the level of commitment to polio eradication was clear, including during meetings I had with officials from Afghanistan and Pakistan, the only two countries that have reported cases of wild polio so far this year or in 2017. Dr. Ferozuddin Feroz, Afghanistan's Minister of Public Health, outlined his country's plan to accelerate progress in 15 focus districts, and its ongoing work with mosques and religious leaders to reduce vaccine refusals. Pakistani representatives described their pre-election preparations to ensure the smooth transfer of the polio program to a new government, ensuring that Pakistan finishes the job even as its political landscape changes.

The urgency of stopping transmission was also underscored during a conversation I had with Dr. Matshidiso Moeti, WHO's Regional Director for Africa, and other colleagues about the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where five circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus (cVDPV) cases have been reported so far in 2018. Several VDPV strains continue to circulate through the country, and the situation could grow worse as the DRC also works to contain Ebola. Experts at the meeting emphasized the importance of prioritizing the response effort and improving the quality of emergency vaccination campaigns so that the outbreak can be stopped before it spreads further. While I'm encouraged by the program's ability to stop VDPVs in other challenging settings like [Syria](#), we must take urgent action to ensure that children in DRC are fully protected.

It's evident from my week at WHA that leaders from around the world remain committed to fulfilling the promise first made 30 years ago: to end this paralyzing disease once and for all. I look forward to continuing our work together to put our words into action.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several fluid, overlapping strokes that form the name 'Chris Elias'.

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