

Madam Chair,

Afghanistan with full support of GPEI partners including WHO, makes significant progress in polio eradication, but the mission is far from being accomplished yet.

One and half year on from removal of the Taliban imposed ban on house-to-house campaigns, polio eradication programme in Afghanistan has made critical gains.

Wild poliovirus transmission in Afghanistan is currently at its lowest level in history -with only two cases of WPV with zero cVDPV2 cases - giving the Program an extraordinary opportunity to end polio.

Since 2018, bans on polio vaccination activities in districts controlled by the Taliban had left 3.5 million children unvaccinated. The recent resumption of nationwide polio vaccination campaigns has been a critical step forward.

While access has improved across the country and the number of children paralyzed by polio has reduced tremendously in Afghanistan, significant barriers are still there, accessing every child through house-to-house vaccination remains a challenge in **some** areas leaving immunity gaps and children at risk.

Safety and security of polio program workers is the chronic issue hindering the Program's long-term success. Afghanistan Polio Eradication Program lost its 8 polio workers in February 2022 in a targeted attack in country's north. Four of those killed were women. This is whilst in 2021, nine other polio workers were killed by unknown militants during polio vaccination campaigns.

While the polio programme has made important progress in the 1.5 years in Afghanistan, but given that Afghanistan and Pakistan sharing one epidemiological block, the overall success of the Program is highly interdependent between these two countries.

The sharp rise in the number of wild polio cases in Pakistan coupled with the detection of one case each in Malawi and Mozambique should put us in a sense of urgency required to permanently interrupt transmission of the virus in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. This highlights the importance of cross border coordination between the countries which is recently challenged following the cross-border clashes and blame games ran by both sides.

To achieve the polio free target and for the two programmes to succeed, the TAG during its recent meeting in Muscat also proposed context-specific tactics and technical guidance on activities to prioritize until mid-2023.

Finally, in the longer term, the polio program with high quality campaigns in Afghanistan could only be sustainable if critical steps are taken to integrate the program with the country's routine immunization program and the promises to establish the in-country polio Lab is materialized.

Madam Chair,

A polio free Afghanistan is within reach – but there is still a long way to go.

I thank you Madam Chair,