



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Message of

DR ALA ALWAN

REGIONAL DIRECTOR

WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGIONAL OFFICE

to the

**MEETING OF THE TECHNICAL ADVISORY GROUP ON POLIOMYELITIS
ERADICATION IN AFGHANISTAN**

Kabul, Afghanistan, 6–7 May 2012

Mr Chairman, dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the meeting of the Technical Advisory Group on Poliomyelitis Eradication in Afghanistan. I would like to welcome all members of the Technical Advisory Group and thank them for accepting to be with us for these two days. I would like, as well, to express sincere gratitude to the Government of Afghanistan for hosting this TAG meeting, and to the delegations, and to acknowledge with appreciation their presence with us despite their other important commitments.

I wish also to take this opportunity to acknowledge the commitment and extensive efforts of the national authorities towards the goal of polio eradication. I welcome representatives of our close partners, who are with us in this meeting, namely UNICEF, Rotary International, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Atlanta, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), USAID, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA).

Dear Colleagues,

This is the first specific Technical Advisory Group meeting for Afghanistan with the objective of having more focused and detailed discussion on each and every issue. The

meeting is taking place at a very critical time for the eradication initiative and with a lot of concern being expressed about the continued virus circulation in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In 2011, Afghanistan reported 80 cases as compared to 25 in 2010. More than 80% of cases were reported from the known endemic zone in the southern provinces, including Farah. Due to an explosive outbreak, polio cases were reported also from outside the transmission zone. The spread of disease in Afghanistan outside the transmission zone clearly indicates that the current level of effort is insufficient to stop all transmission, and that sustained and comprehensive action is required from national authorities to address the situation.

At the same time, it is significant to note that no wild poliovirus of type 3 has been reported in Afghanistan for almost two years.

Dear Colleagues

In Afghanistan, where security problems are the main reason for the inability to reach all children, a wide range of approaches is being implemented by the national programme to ensure accessibility in these conflict-affected areas. The constitution of a working group, chaired by Her Excellency the Minister of Public Health, which meets every month to monitor the situation and provide guidance on policy and strategic issues, is an indicator of the high political engagement with polio eradication in Afghanistan. A consultative group, chaired by the General Director of Preventive Medicine, to focus on the 13 high-risk districts and to discuss innovative approaches to improve access and campaign quality in these districts, is another step forward, aiming to achieve a breakthrough in the southern region.

In January this year, WHO's Executive Board passed a resolution declaring the completion of polio eradication a "programmatically emergency for global public health". In follow-up to this, an "emergency approach" to polio eradication has been implemented in the Region, together with WHO headquarters and partners, CDC, UNICEF, Rotary and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Dear Colleagues,

The preparation of the Emergency Action Plan 2012 is very timely and comprehensive and very much focused on ownership, oversight and accountability by the government functionaries, and on suggesting remedial measures to address the problems. The National Task Force has been constituted to monitor its implementation and progress regularly. In

addition, the office of His Excellency the President will provide oversight on the progress through regular monitoring in coordination with the district and provincial governors.

Migrant populations are potentially another high-risk population carrying the virus within the country and in the known corridors of transmission between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Good planning is needed to vaccinate migrants wherever they are during the vaccination campaign.

Accessible and improved routine immunization services are the key strategy for polio eradication. It is very critical that both the Expanded Programme on immunization and the Poliomyelitis Eradication Programme complement each other. It is also essential that the Grant and Contracts Management Unit, nongovernmental organizations implementing the basic package of health services, provincial health and the districts collaborate and coordinate with each other. WHO, UNICEF and all the partners in vaccination are fully committed to supporting the government in this regard.

“Communication” is a very powerful tool these days in influencing opinion, raising community awareness and creating/demand among the population. This is equally important for the polio eradication. I would like to thank colleagues from UNICEF and many civil society organizations in developing and implementing specialized communication interventions in the high-risk areas.

Mr Chairman, Dear Colleagues,

Before ending, I would like to encourage all of you to contribute actively to the success of this meeting. The aim of this meeting is to give you the opportunity to raise any issues that you believe have been hampering the polio eradication programme in Afghanistan, to suggest potential solutions that may help to overcome these constraints and to bring these thoughts to the attention of the expert group present with us. They will then frame, for the benefit of the Government of Afghanistan as well as all contributing partners, specific recommendations, as well as some innovative means and approaches, to improve the impact of the polio eradication activities in the country and to stop poliovirus transmission urgently.

I remain very encouraged by the sustained commitment in Afghanistan. I am sure that this commitment, together with your guidance and the full support of partners, will enable the programme to overcome the remaining challenges and achieve the long awaited eradication

goal. Let me thank you once more and wish you a successful meeting. I look forward to your views and recommendations.

It remains for me to wish you a safe and pleasant stay in Kabul.