



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Message from
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REGIONAL DIRECTOR
WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION
to the
TWENTY-SIXTH MEETING OF THE REGIONAL COMMISSION FOR
CERTIFICATION OF POLIOMYELITIS ERADICATION
Dubai, United Arab Emirates, 3–5 April 2012

Your Excellency Mr Abdul Rahman bin Mohamad Al-Owais, Mr Chairman, Members of the Commission, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the twenty-sixth meeting of the Regional Commission for Certification of Poliomyelitis Eradication. I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the Government of the United Arab Emirates for hosting this meeting and the excellent arrangements made, and to specifically thank H.E. Mr Abdul Rahman bin Mohamad Al-Owais, Minister of Health, United Arab Emirates, for honouring us with his presence on this occasion. Let me also express my appreciation to the Commission members, to the Chairpersons of the National Certification Committees and to the national programme managers for their commitment and continued efforts to achieve the long-awaited goal of polio eradication.

I wish also to welcome the representatives of the polio eradication partners – Rotary International, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and UNICEF, as well as WHO staff from the regional offices, and field staff.

In the next three days, the Commission will review 21 reports from 21 countries; 17 abridged annual updates, 3 annual updates and 1 final national documentation report. You have an extensive agenda. Review of these country reports is critical to ensuring satisfactory progress has been made in these countries for certification of the Region as polio-free.

Dear Colleagues,

In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, the eradication programme faces specific challenges. Two of the three remaining endemic countries in the world belong to this region – Afghanistan and Pakistan. There is political turmoil in Libya, Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. Vaccine-derived polioviruses are circulating in Somalia and Yemen. Almost one million target children cannot be reached for vaccination in Somalia. Most important, we must maintain the status of the polio-free countries. The risk of poliovirus transmission following importation is now very high, particularly in Djibouti, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen. The Regional Office is assisting Member States to undertake every possible effort to avert this danger, through implementing supplementary immunization activities and ensuring effective surveillance.

In January this year, WHO's Executive Board declared the completion of polio eradication a programmatic emergency for global public health. In order to be able to respond to this in an aggressive and timely manner, an emergency approach to polio eradication has been adopted. I have activated the emergency standard operating procedures for the Region in general, and specifically for Pakistan and Afghanistan. Polio eradication is the foremost priority of the Region and the programme will continue to perform under my direct supervision and with my personal support.

Dear Colleagues,

The epidemiological situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan is not satisfactory. Both countries reported a high number of polio cases in 2011, unprecedented in the past 10 years. In Afghanistan, due to an explosive outbreak, polio cases were reported also from outside the transmission zone of the southern region, where around 20% of children are inaccessible due to the conflict.

In Pakistan, the spread of disease clearly indicates that the current level of effort is insufficient to stop all wild poliovirus transmission. The country is facing multiple challenges. Escalation of insecurity is preventing the free access of children to polio vaccination and there are management problems, especially at the delivery levels. Accelerating the effective implementation of the National Emergency Action Plan (NEAP) for Polio Eradication is the key to completing the job in Pakistan. We are, at present, beginning to see some positive changes in attitude and performance in some areas, which we hope will be further strengthened all over Pakistan and maintained until the target is achieved.

Dear Colleagues,

In spite of these constraints I remain optimistic that through the sustained commitment of all countries of the Region, the dedication and devotion of both the national and international staff and the continued and generous support from all polio eradication partners, this Region will achieve eradication of polio in the very near future.

I would like to thank colleagues from other Regions participating in this meeting. Sharing best practices, and enhancing coordination and collaboration will help us all in preventing situations such as the Tajikistan outbreak and importation into China from Pakistan.

Without taking up more of your time, it only remains for me to wish you a very productive meeting and a pleasant stay in Dubai.