



*In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful*

**Address by**

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**to the**

**SEVENTH MEETING OF THE REGIONAL INTER-AGENCY  
COORDINATION COMMITTEE FOR POLIOMYELITIS AND THE  
EXPANDED PROGRAMME ON IMMUNIZATION**

**EMRO, Cairo, 5–6 April 2001**

Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to the seventh meeting of the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Committee. It is a special pleasure to welcome to this meeting our close partners from UNICEF, Rotary International, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the African Development Bank and the International Medical Center of Japan.

I would also like to extend my warm welcome and my gratitude to the national officers responsible for the expanded programme on immunization and polio eradication from participating countries and to our colleagues from WHO headquarters and the field. Your continued interest, commitment and significant support to poliomyelitis eradication efforts at the

regional and national levels are highly appreciated. These efforts have been critical to progress, not only towards polio eradication but also towards a stronger expanded programme on immunization in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

During this meeting you will have ample chance to be brought up to date on achievements in poliomyelitis eradication and EPI. I wish however, to highlight a few of the important developments that occurred during 2000 and which were made possible by the generous support of our partners.

Dear colleagues

Considerable progress has been made towards polio eradication in the Eastern Mediterranean Region since your previous meeting about one year ago. The number of reported poliomyelitis cases in 2000 fell significantly, to half that reported in 1999, despite a great improvement in surveillance. It is gratifying to note that through intensive control measures it was possible to end the poliomyelitis outbreak that occurred in Iraq during the second half of 1999, with the last confirmed case from this outbreak in January 2000. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, during 2000 there was a great reduction in the number of isolated polioviruses and in the number of districts from which wild viruses were isolated.

What has been achieved towards polio eradication has been due to the extensive effort by the polio endemic countries together with the international coalition of partners in response to the global and regional resolutions to accelerate the polio eradication initiative.

National immunization days and other supplementary immunization activities have been intensified in countries with persistent poliovirus circulation. Furthermore, the quality of campaigns in these remaining endemic countries has been improved substantially through house-to-house vaccination, greater emphasis on high-risk areas and improved planning and supervision.

Acute flaccid paralysis surveillance continued to improve all over the Region, and the required level of sensitivity that was reached for the first time in 1999 was maintained and even

improved during 2000. The laboratory network continued to progress, and I am glad to inform you that all the laboratories in the regional network are now accredited. As well, a regional plan to achieve containment of laboratory stocks of wild polioviruses was developed as part of a global initiative to ensure that the chance introduction of viruses from laboratories into the community will not occur after the polio eradication goal is achieved.

Dear colleagues

I wish to emphasize that despite these significant achievements the job has not finished. It is also clear that the remaining steps needed to achieve a polio-free Eastern Mediterranean Region are not easy as there are still many challenges that face us, particularly in countries suffering from long-standing wars and political isolation, and those that do not have the necessary infrastructure, or simply cannot bear the full cost of the effort.

Addressing these challenges during the present, critical phase of poliomyelitis eradication will require concerted efforts from each government, international partner and UN agency concerned, in order to ensure the availability of the necessary human and financial resources as well as to secure peace and safe access to children in war-affected areas.

The acceleration initiated in 1999 will reach a peak during this year. All the national and sub-national campaigns in endemic countries during this period will be conducted entirely using the house-to-house vaccination strategy. Reaching the unreached during this intense and final phase of eradication will require substantial additional human and financial resources. The role of the international partners in polio eradication, the largest partnership in the history of public health, will be crucial in mobilizing the resources and, more important, rallying the political commitment needed to achieve the eradication goal.

Dear colleagues

Achieving and sustaining high routine immunization coverage of infants is a major priority in the Region. Routine immunization activities are still lagging behind in six countries. Several efforts have been initiated to support the national authorities in these countries in order to rapidly

improve the routine coverage through expansion of fixed sites and provision of cold chain equipment. In addition, a sustainable outreach strategy was developed to be used for routine vaccination in areas lacking fixed health services, particularly in conflict-affected countries. The lessons learnt from polio eradication strategies to access children under these circumstances have been of great benefit. These six countries that are lagging behind with respect to immunization are eligible for the Global Alliance for Vaccine and Immunization support and we sincerely hope that they will benefit from the Global Fund for Children's Vaccines. WHO is extending the necessary support to these countries to fulfil the basic prerequisites for Global Alliance for Vaccine and Immunization support.

I am glad to note that parallel to polio eradication activities, and without jeopardizing them, elimination and control initiatives for other preventable diseases are gaining momentum, particularly measles and neonatal tetanus. A regional goal for measles elimination was developed and recently updated through international consultations, and several countries have embarked on its implementation; it is hoped that the regional goal of measles elimination by 2010 will be achieved. As for neonatal tetanus elimination, it has been achieved in 16 of the 23 countries of the Region. High-risk area activities have been implemented in recent years in those countries where neonatal tetanus has not been eliminated. However, unavailability of funds prevented the implementation of nationwide activities. Currently, after the support provided by UNICEF and the availability of global funding, appropriate plans have been updated for Egypt, Pakistan, Sudan and the Republic of Yemen, and implementation will start this year. Plans will soon be formulated for Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia.

Dear colleagues

An important objective of this meeting is to discuss the budgetary situation for polio eradication in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. The five-year regional plan of action with the external resource requirements for polio eradication has been updated. This document reflects the consensus reached on the magnitude, intensity and types of accelerated eradication activities necessary to achieve the target of polio eradication. It has been prepared in close consultation with the national authorities of priority countries and the partner agencies. The document reflects external resources required in support of national resources and identifies shortfalls in the

resources to be channelled through WHO and UNICEF, the two agencies directly involved in implementing polio eradication activities. These figures have been reached after considerable advocacy efforts by both WHO and UNICEF to obtain maximum national funding to support eradication. During the meeting, a five-year plan for measles elimination with the external resource requirements will be presented and discussed.

Before ending these introductory remarks, I wish to specifically acknowledge that the success we are witnessing is a result of the extensive efforts of national authorities and of global partnership and support. This partnership is becoming stronger everyday. Looking beyond the provision of technical and financial support, the active and highly effective participation of partner agencies in advocacy efforts to secure political commitment and mobilize communities is a particularly encouraging sign of how much this partnership has matured.

I wish to thank you again and look forward to reviewing your valuable critical comments and observations on the regional and national programmes and to your continued interest and support; it only remains for me to wish you all a pleasant stay in Cairo.