Cambodia and Lao People’s Democratic Republic Have Eliminated Trachoma as a Public Health Problem

After over a decade of efforts, Cambodia and Lao People’s Democratic Republic have eliminated trachoma as a public health problem. Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General and Dr Shin Young-soo, WHO Regional Director for the Western Pacific Region, congratulated health ministers from the two countries for this historical achievement during the sixty-eight session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Western Pacific 2017 in Brisbane, Australia.
**Cambodia**

From August to September 2017, the National Helminth Control Programme, Ministry of Health and in collaboration with the Ministry of Rural Development, continued to implement the community-led initiative to eliminate schistosomiasis with water, sanitation and hygiene intervention (CL-SWASH) in four schistosomiasis-endemic villages, two of which were in Kratie province and two in Stung Treng province. The CL-SWASH empowers communities to take control of eliminating schistosomiasis by understanding the linkage between schistosomiasis and sanitation, and taking action by building latrines and improving hygienic behaviour.

The National Helminth Control Programme held its National Consultation Workshop to finalize the Schistosomiasis Elimination Action Plan in Cambodia (2017-2021) from 14 to 15 September 2017. Participants discussed the goal, targets, and strategic actions to eliminate schistosomiasis as a public health problem in Cambodia. National and provincial representatives from the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Rural Development, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, and WHO participated in the workshop.

The National Helminth Control Programme and Population Service International (PSI) continued to provide deworming against soil-transmitted helminthiases (STH) twice a year (May and November) to workers and their families in plantations in eight north-eastern provinces of Cambodia (Rattanakiri, Mondulkiri, Stung Treng, Kratie, Kampong Thom, Kampong Cham, Tboung Khmum and Preah Vihear) for the third consecutive year.

Country-wide prevalence mapping of *Opisthorchis viverrini* in Cambodia was conducted between September and November 2017, covering all 25 provinces of Cambodia. In each province, 10 villages were randomly selected and all individuals over 6 years of age in randomly selected households were enrolled and the collected stool samples were analyzed by the formalin-ether concentration method. The data entry and analysis of data are ongoing.
An International Symposium for Cestode Zoonoses Control was organised in Chengdu, Sichuan Province by NIPD, the Sichuan CDC, and the First Affiliated Hospital of Xinjiang University on 15 and 16 November, and more than 200 people from 13 countries around the world attended. The international symposium discussed the latest strategies and tools in the control and elimination of taeniasis, and established the Belt and Road Network for the elimination and control of echinococcosis and cysticercosis.

Deworming campaigns for workers and their families in plantations in north-eastern provinces in Cambodia, November 2017

China

The National Training on Indoor Residual Spraying (IRS), Case Management and Laboratory Testing on Visceral Leishmaniasis Control was jointly organized by the National Institute of Parasitic Diseases (NIPD) of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and WHO from 13 to 17 November in Gansu Province. A total of 70 participants from seven provincial CDCs and 10 municipal CDCs attended the training, learnt WHO-recommended IRS and other spraying techniques and practiced the skills of wall-spraying, laying a good foundation for the prevention and control of kala-azar in Liting Village, Longnan City of Gansu Province.

Fiji

The Fiji Ministry of Health and Medical Services conducted the lymphatic filariasis (LF) transmission assessment survey (TAS) 3 in the Western Division (except for Malolo Island) in September and October 2017 and TAS 2 in Central Division in October and November 2017. While the number of children testing positive in both divisions was below the critical cut-off, 16 positives against a critical cut-off of 18 out of 2 467 children tested in Central Division gave rise to concern, and further analysis is currently under way. TAS 3 in the Northern Division (except for Taveuni Island) will be implemented in 2018. The remaining areas (Eastern Division, Taveuni island in the Northern Division and Malolo island in the Western Division) are planning to implement the second round of the additional mass drug administration (MDA) after identifying ongoing transmission of LF at the sentinel and spot-check site surveys in 2016.

The Fiji Ministry of Health and Medical Services has started the healthy school project which includes school deworming in selected primary schools. It works in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, with technical input from WHO and financial support from KOICA. The Technical Working Group, including representatives from WHO, developed a standard protocol to assess the baseline prevalence of STH among primary school students. The baseline surveys in the phase one schools (89) were completed by December 2017, and will be performed in the phase two schools (115) in the first half of 2018. Follow-up measures in phase one schools will be put in place in 2019. School deworming activities following the baseline assessments will commence in early 2018.
French Polynesia

The Ministry of Health of French Polynesia conducted TAS 2 in Tahiti urban area, using the filariasis test strip (FTS), and found no positives out of 1,189 children aged 6-7 years tested from September to the end of November 2017.

Kiribati

The Kiribati Ministry of Health implemented LF TAS 3 in part of South Tarawa between August and December 2017. A total of 2,487 primary school students were tested and no positives were found. TAS 3 was completed in the Line Islands in October 2017, where 526 primary school students were tested with no positives found. TAS 3 in the three remaining outer islands (Abaiang, Banaba and Maiana) in the Gilbert Islands will be completed in early 2018.

The Kiribati Ministry of Health continued deworming preschool-aged and school-aged children twice a year. The second round of deworming was completed by November 2017. Reported treatment coverage was 52% for preschool-aged children and 48% of the school-aged children. Women of child-bearing age (WCBA) were also given deworming tablets through community outreach activities. Treatment coverage among WCBA was 40%.

The Lao People’s Democratic Republic

In preparation for the LF TAS 1 in Lao PDR, a TAS supervisor’s workshop was held on 18 September 2017 to review the TAS protocol, responsibilities and FTS methodology with the support of the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (USCDC), and the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) ENVISION Indonesia team. The Department of Communicable Disease Control (DCDC) and the Centre for Malariology, Parasitology and Entomology (CMPE) in the Ministry of Health, with support from the team above, then gave on-the-job training to survey teams from 21 to 23 September.

TAS 1 was conducted after 6 rounds of MDA in Attapeu province, the only endemic province in the country, from 24 September to 13 October 2017. The teams tested 1,833 children and found no positives. TAS 1 thus passed successfully and the government of Lao PDR decided to stop LF MDA and move to post-MDA surveillance.

The Center for Environmental Health and Water Supply (Nam Saat), together with CMPE and DCDC, jointly implemented CL-SWASH in 14 new villages where schistosomiasis-infected individuals are still found and access to villages is relatively poor. This was done in the third and fourth quarter of 2017.

School deworming activity against soil-transmitted helminthiases and MDA against schistosomiasis took place in October and December 2017, respectively.

Rotary International District 2650 from Japan participated in a MDA campaign against schistosomiasis in Thamakhep village of Khong district, Champasak province on 14 November 2017. The purpose of their mission was to explore an opportunity to support NTD control activities in Lao PDR.

CMPE conducted a technical meeting in September 2017 with staff from central-, provincial-, and district-level representatives from the Ministries of Health, Education and Sport, and Agriculture and Forestry to develop a guideline for the control of opisthorchiasis, taeniasis and cysticercosis in selected pilot provinces.
From 7 to 8 September and 19 to 20 October 2017, DCDC held meetings to develop a five-year action plan (2018-2022) to implement multi-sectoral control of opisthorchiasis, taeniasis and cysticercosis in a selected pilot province (Savannakhet) involving staff of the Ministries of Health, Education and Sport, and Agriculture and Forestry. The activity plan entails areas such as food safety, WASH, animal health, education, case detection and management, and M&E.

Niue

Niue received official WHO acknowledgement for having achieved elimination of LF as a public health problem at the Pacific Health Ministers’ Meeting held from 27 to 30 August 2017 in Cook Islands. The Regional Director of the WHO Western Pacific Region, Dr. Shin Young-soo, handed over the official letter to the Minister of Health at the ceremony organized to celebrate Pacific health achievements.

Malaysia

The Ministry of Health’s national LF elimination programme carried out the enhanced MDA cycle 9 from 12 September to 9 October 2017 in implementation units (IU) Lawas, Sundar and Bangkalalak. These three IUs failed TAS 2 in 2016.

Mini-TAS was conducted in IUs Tangkarason and Medamit from 5 September to 13 October 2017, covering all children aged from 9 to 14. This was in response to the recommendation of the Consultation to Accelerate Elimination of Brugia malayi Transmission in Indonesia and Malaysia held in Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia, from 13 to 15 December, 2016. Both IUs passed mini-TAS and will proceed with TAS 2 in 2019.

By October 2017, all 55 endemic IUs that were scheduled for TAS 3 in Peninsular Malaysia (including Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah, Perak, and Pahang) implemented it and passed the assessment. These IUs will prepare for dossier documentation and continue with on-going surveillance.

Palau

A cross-sectional survey to determine the prevalence of LF in migrant workers from Bangladesh and the Philippines, the two LF-endemic countries of origin of most migrant workers in Palau, was conducted from April to June 2017 with WHO support. The survey took account of the fact that over 20% of Palau’s total population is made up of migrant workers and the LF infection rate in this population has never been assessed. A total of 893 migrant workers were tested using FTS. Of the 611 Filipino and 282 Bangladesh migrant workers tested, 28 (4.6%) and 24 (8.5%) were positives, respectively. The next step for elimination of LF in Palau is being discussed with WHO and LF experts.

Papua New Guinea

A mid-term sentinel and spot-check site survey in New Ireland Province was conducted in October 2017. Survey sites were selected in the following local level government (LLG) areas: East Coast and West Coast Tikana, Sentral Niu Ailan, and Namatanai Rural & Urban. A total of 1 312 individuals aged over 5 years were tested using the Immunochromatographic Diagnostic Test (ICT), ranging from 318 to 657 individuals per LLG. No positives were found in Kavieng district and 4 positives were found out of 655 individuals tested in Namatanai district, all of whom were from Namatanai Rural & Urban LLG. Three rounds of MDA were conducted in New Ireland Province from 2014 to 2016 but the fourth round, set for 2017, was not done because of nationwide financial constraints. The Government of Papua New Guinea is considering the adoption of triple drug therapy in New Ireland Province, and starting MDA once again with the triple drug therapy in East New Britain and West New Britain in 2018.

Marshall Islands

Marshall Islands received official WHO acknowledgement for having achieved elimination of LF as a public health problem at the Pacific Health Ministers’ Meeting held from 27 to 30 August 2017 in Cook Islands. The Regional Director of the WHO Western Pacific Region, Dr. Shin Young-soo, handed over the official letter to the Marshall Islands Minister of Health at the ceremony organized to celebrate Pacific health achievements.

The Federated States of Micronesia

The Department of Health and Social Affairs of the Federated States of Micronesia completed the second of two additional MDA rounds against LF in Northern Nomoneas Islands, the last remaining region of the Chuuk state, by September 2017. Overall treatment coverage in Chuuk was 76%. Scattered oceanic terrain, infrequent transport to the outer islands and very limited manpower contributed to the MDA being staggered over a long period. Pre-TAS in Chuuk, followed by TAS in all four states, is planned in early 2018.

The Philippines

The Philippines Department of Health developed the six-year Strategic Plan for the Control of STH 2017-2022 in the Philippines. Aligned with global goals and targets, the plan will not only continue providing deworming services to children at risk of STH, but also expand it to other vulnerable groups such as WCBA, pregnant women and indigenous communities, beginning in 2018.
The Philippines Department of Health, working with the Department of Education, rolled out the national deworming campaign in July 2017. The treatment coverage in July 2017 reached 72.1%, which compares favorably to the previous totals (January 2016 was 64.9%, July 2016 was 69.2%, and January 2017 was 68.7%). The coverage among pre-school age children and school-age children was 75.7% and 71% respectively. The improved coverage could be due to greater community awareness of the importance of deworming thanks to concerted and collective advocacy, communication and social mobilization efforts by the health and education sectors, local government units, private partners and other stakeholders.

With continuous financial and technical support from WHO, the Department of Health Project on Neglected Tropical Disease Management Information System (NTD-MIS) was able to showcase its work on the NTD-MIS project at the meeting of the Coalition for Operational Research on NTDs (COR-NTD) from 3 to 4 November 2017, in Baltimore, USA. The NTD-MIS which was built on a platform of prompt data collection and piloted in two regions aims to provide informed decisions to program managers at different levels when taking steps to improve MDA.

The target area for deployment of NTD-MIS was expanded to include two more cities in the National Capital Region, Makati and Marikina, as well as the province of Bohol in Region 7. Training workshops for municipal and local government unit health staff were held in Makati in October, Marikina in November, and Bohol in December 2017. The final report on the operational research activity, which aimed to strengthen TAS by comparing a community-based TAS targeting individuals above 8 years of age and a standard TAS targeting 6 to 7 year-old children, conducted in Mindoro Oriental Province from May to June 2017, was completed in October 2017. All child and community specimens were tested using both FTS and the antifilarial antibody (Wb123 RDT and ELISA). The evaluation unit did not pass the standard child TAS and a programmatic decision was accordingly made to conduct two additional rounds of MDA in 2017 and 2018.

With the recent release of the WHO’s Field use of molluscicides in schistosomiasis control programmes manual, the Department of Health held a consultative workshop in Manila from 2 to 4 October to discuss the development of a Guideline on Malacological Snail Surveillance and Control in order to interrupt transmission of schistosomiasis in the country. At the workshop, the list of snail sites by endemic barangays was updated and the extent of snail mapping by GPS was discussed.

The Department of Health held the 2nd NTD Research Forum in Manila from 2 to 4 October to share global and regional updates on NTD elimination and control, assess progress in the Philippines, and explore possible research agendas and other innovative tools that might help improve the current NTD programme strategies. The overall aim is to ensure effective and efficient delivery of healthcare services in the country.

Samoa

After completing the second of two additional rounds of MDA in May 2017, the Samoa Ministry of Health implemented TAS 1 in North-West Upolu, along with TAS 2 in the other two evaluation units (EU) between July and October 2017. TAS failed in all 3 EUs, with the number of FTS positives among primary school students above the critical cut-off level.

American Samoa also failed TAS 3 in 2016, which means re-starting MDA. The significant population movement between Samoa and American Samoa has implications for LF transmission in both countries. In order to enhance and synchronize MDA in the two countries in a coordinated manner, a bi-national planning meeting to accelerate elimination of LF was held from 29 November to 1 December 2017 in Pago Pago, American Samoa, with the support of WHO and partners such as USCDC, Pacific Island Health Officers’ Association (PIHOA) and James Cook University, Australia.

Assessment of the prevalence of STH was integrated into TAS using the same sampling frame of primary school students as for LF. Although pre-survey training was supported by a WHO consultant, the team was unable to collect the required amount of stool samples in the actual survey due to logistical constraints. Nonetheless, the limited data still suggest a STH prevalence that may well be between 20% and 50% in Savaii.

Solomon Islands

Solomon Islands held a national inter-sectoral workshop in October 2017 to discuss the draft of the updated national action plan for control of NTDs prepared prior to the meeting with WHO technical support. The workshop was attended by units from the Ministry of Health and Medical Services such as the community health division, eye care unit, leprosy programme, Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI), national medical store, health information system and health emergency programme, along with the Ministry of Education and rural WASH (RWASH) programme. Participants discussed
the key interventions to be implemented in the coming three years, integration opportunities across multiple diseases, and relevant partners for each intervention.

**Tonga**

Tonga received official acknowledgement by WHO for having achieved elimination of LF as a public health problem at the Pacific Health Ministers’ Meeting held from 27 to 30 August 2017 in Cook Islands. The Regional Director of the WHO Western Pacific Region, Dr. Shin Young-soo, handed over the official letter to the Minister of Health at the ceremony organized to celebrate Pacific health achievements.

**Tuvalu**

Tuvalu conducted a LF survey combining pre-TAS and TAS 1 in August-December 2017. This was done because of logistic difficulties in reaching outer islands for multiple surveys. The survey tested 2,807 children aged between 6 and 15 years using ICT with technical support from WHO. The results found 41 positive children, indicating a positivity rate of 1.46%. Of the positive children, 31 (75%) were from the Central islands group where only 25% of the total population lives. Tuvalu will continue enhanced MDA, focusing more attention to this group of islands.

A deworming round was completed, targeting pre-school and school-aged children as well as women of childbearing age by December 2017. Coverage data are awaited.

**Vanuatu**

Vanuatu completed a total of 19 NTD health zone workshops in five provinces, with 94% of the health workers participating in the workshops. The workshops discussed monthly monitoring and reporting of investigated NTD cases and treatment data, health education and technical and financial support needs.

In Tafea province, the provincial team investigated confirmed yaws cases and carried out focal treatment in the affected area. A total of 4,333 people were treated in Zone 1, 2 and 3 in Tafea province. South Malekula implemented a focal MDA for yaws in July 2017 with 3,441 people treated. After three years of health education in this area, the number of reported yaws cases has fallen drastically. Overall country data is also showing a significant drop in yaws cases; however, reported scabies cases have been increasing and will require urgent attention.

Deworming for school children was completed with 50% reported coverage for a total of 23,390 people treated.

**Viet Nam**

The Vietnam National Institute of Ophthalmology (VNIO) conducted trachoma MDA training from 26 to 27 July in Lung Ho commune health station in Yen Minh District, Ha Giang Province. Training was attended by three staff from the VNIO, two from Ha Giang Eye Hospital, one from Yen Minh District Health Center, two commune health workers and 14 village health workers from the seven villages. At the training, staff from the VNIO also prepared and distributed leaflets explaining what trachoma is, how to prevent it, and how to use drugs to treat active trachoma.

The training was immediately followed by MDA using Zithromax in seven villages from 28 to 30 July 2017. Thanks to the hard work put in by the volunteers, 1,856 people out of a total population of 2,350 people were treated (79%) despite the complex topography in Lung Ho commune.

**Wallis and Futuna**

Technical assistance was provided by WHO in developing the draft dossier for validation of elimination of LF as a public health problem. The draft will be translated into French and returned to the health ministry for final review and official submission to WHO.

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2 **REGIONAL NEWS**

After Cambodia and Lao People’s Democratic Republic being validated as having eliminated trachoma as a public health problem in June 2017, the plaque and letter of appreciation for their achievement was presented to Dr Or Vandine, Director General for Health, Cambodia by Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General, Dr Shin Young-soo, WHO Regional Director for the Western Pacific, and Ms Glenys Beauchamp PSM, Secretary, Department of Health, Australia, Chairperson of sixty-eight session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Western Pacific, during the sixty-eight session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Western Pacific, 12 October 2017 in Brisbane, Australia.

Dr Padmasiri Eswara Aratchige, the former Medical Officer and NTD focal point at the Division of Pacific Technical Support based at the WHO Representative Office in Fiji, retired from the Organization in September 2017.