South Asia slashes polio cases by nearly half

Authorities committed to 2005 target to end paralysing disease

4 FEBRUARY 2005 | GENEVA -- The three countries on the Asian continent that still have polio are on target to end the disease this year, their health authorities said today. Last year, polio cases in Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan were slashed by 45%. Similar momentum this year should put an end to the transmission of polio in this particularly crowded corner of the world, which has proven a challenge to global eradication efforts.

Meeting at the World Health Organization’s headquarters in Geneva, the health ministers and senior officials hammered out a plan for 2005 that involves massive and repeated polio immunization campaigns in the few remaining affected districts of these countries. The emphasis will be on reaching children in communities traditionally under-served by health services.

Similar action last year paid off in the shrinking geographic footprint of the poliovirus and in falling numbers of affected children. Total cases in the region have fallen from 336 in 2003 to 186 in 2004 (reported as of 1 February 2005), while surveillance of the disease in the key districts is twice as sensitive. Vast areas of each country reported no polio last year. Afghanistan's president Hamid Karzai, India's Congress Party leader Sonia Gandhi and Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf all lent their personal support to the 2004 immunization campaigns, during which 210 million children were given 1.5 billion doses of vaccine.

"The poliovirus is currently cornered in only six of the 51 states and provinces within the three countries," said Bill Sergeant, Chair of the International PolioPlus Committee of Rotary International, the humanitarian service organization that championed the charge to eradicate polio and has contributed volunteer power and more than US$ 500 million. "This is the year to rid Asia of polio."

Administrative officials from beyond the health services are being pressed into duty: in key areas, teachers, district administrators, railway workers, and other government employees are mobilizing for vaccination campaigns. Officials also acknowledged the complementary need to ramp up routine immunization of children to prevent the virus coming back.

India, Pakistan and Afghanistan have increased the power of their surveillance and detection systems for polio virus this past year, providing even great assurance that polio was at its lowest levels ever during 2004 with 132 children paralysed in India, 50 in Pakistan and four in Afghanistan. Up to 21 additional immunization campaigns across the region in 2005 will involve millions of volunteers fanning out home-to-home from remote villages to the vast metropolitan slums to reach all children under five years of age.

Note for Editors: Polio is spread by faecal-oral contact and can be prevented by an oral vaccine. The meeting in Geneva today was the one-year follow-up to the Geneva Declaration on the Eradication of Poliomyelitis,
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a 2004 pledge by polio-endemic countries to intensify their activities towards eradication. The 16-year Global Polio Eradication Initiative, a public-private partnership spearheaded by the World Health Organization, Rotary International, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and UNICEF, has reduced the incidence of polio across the world from an estimated 350,000 cases in 1988 to just over 1,200 cases in 2004, a drop of 99%. Health authorities from polio-affected countries in Africa met in Geneva last month to finalize their region-specific plans.

The polio eradication coalition includes governments of countries affected by polio; private sector foundations (e.g. United Nations Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation); development banks (e.g. the World Bank); donor governments (e.g. Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Malaysia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Oman, Portugal, Qatar, the Russian Federation, Spain, Sweden, United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the United States of America); the European Commission; humanitarian and nongovernmental organizations (e.g. the International Red Cross and Red Crescent societies) and corporate partners (e.g. Sanofi Pasteur, De Beers, Wyeth). Volunteers in developing countries also play a key role; 20 million have participated in mass immunization campaigns.