

Statement on stopping transmission of vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2 in Yemen's northern governorates and in Somalia

Tenth Meeting of the Regional Subcommittee for Polio Eradication and Outbreaks 26 March 2024

Acknowledging the appointment of Dr Hanan Balkhy, the first female Regional Director for WHO's Eastern Mediterranean Region, and noting her full commitment to polio eradication;

Noting the progress achieved globally in eradicating poliovirus transmission since 1988;

Noting the extension made to the timeline of the Global Polio Eradication Strategy 2022–2026: Delivering on a Promise for certification of circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2 (cVDPV2) to 2028;

Noting with deep concern the challenges involved in stopping ongoing outbreaks of cVDPV2 in the Region without full access to vaccinate all vulnerable children in the affected populations due to conflict, climate change and insurgency;

Appreciating the Prime Minister of Somalia's decision to establish a national task force on immunization and polio and his commitment to polio eradication as Chair of the task force;

Acknowledging the focused efforts made as part of the Somalia emergency action plan for polio to improve campaign quality, including systematically identifying pockets of missed populations, improving monitoring by engaging third-party monitors and streamlining efforts for accessing missed populations;

Noting with concern the prolonged outbreak of cVDPV2 in Yemen that was first detected in late 2021 and to date has paralysed 237 children, 208 (87%) of whom are in the country's northern governorates;

Observing with alarm the persistent restrictions over the last three years on implementing outbreak response vaccination and the spread of misinformation and disinformation in the northern governorates of Yemen;

Noting that one in four Yemeni children have not received all the vaccinations recommended in the national routine immunization schedule, 17% of whom are zero-dose children, meaning they have not received a single vaccination;

Alarmed by recent evidence of the international spread of cVDPV2 in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, which highlights how easily poliovirus moves with and affects vulnerable populations, particularly in fragile settings where access to health services, including supplementary immunization, is extremely challenging;

Recalling that the international spread of polio is a Public Health Emergency of International Concern under the International Health Regulations (2005);

Recognizing the continued threat to all children posed by vaccine-derived poliovirus and the importance of regional solidarity and support to deliver on the goals of the 2022-2026 Polio Eradication Strategy, which have been endorsed and supported by a wide range of committed donors, such as Rotary International and Member States of the Region, in particular the UAE through the sustained commitment of His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the UAE;

We, the Member States of the Regional Subcommittee on Polio Eradication and Outbreaks:

DECLARE THAT:

1. The ongoing circulation of any strain of poliovirus in the Region is a regional public health emergency;

COMMIT TO:

2. Mobilizing all needed engagement and support by political, community and civil society leaders and sectors at all levels to successfully end polio as a regional public health emergency;
3. Intensifying domestic efforts to increase routine immunization coverage and strengthening national and international surveillance, regional cooperation and cross-border coordination to enhance surveillance for prompt detection of poliovirus, wherever it emerges in the Region;
4. Focusing efforts on reaching the remaining zero-dose children in the consequential geographies of the northern governorates of Yemen and southern and central Somalia, working within the broader humanitarian emergency response context;

REQUEST:

5. The international humanitarian and development communities to scale up their support for the provision of essential services, including a robust vaccination response to the polio outbreaks in Somalia and Yemen using modalities that will deliver an effective level of coverage;
6. The authorities and polio eradication partners in Somalia to build on the progress of the Somalia Polio Eradication Action Plan (SEAP) II and support the implementation of SEAP III to stop the longest-running outbreak in the country and prevent the further spread of cVDPV2 by the end of 2024;
7. The national authorities and the regional polio eradication programme to strengthen regional and cross-border coordination between Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Yemen, given the high risk of further instances of cVDPV2 crossing international borders;
8. The authorities in the northern governorates of Yemen, and health and humanitarian partners, to urgently implement integrated health services campaigns

that include all essential services, including routine immunization and vaccination with novel type 2 oral polio vaccine (nOPV2);

9. The authorities in the northern governorates of Yemen, all immunization partners and the humanitarian development community to respond urgently to the unmitigated vaccine-related misinformation and disinformation campaign risking the lives of thousands of children in Yemen and across the Region;

10. The national authorities in all countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region strengthen capacities for early detection of all polioviruses, including vaccine-derived poliovirus, and prepare for rapid, high-quality response.

11. The WHO Regional Director to fully support efforts for the cessation of polio outbreaks in Somalia and Yemen, including by advocating for all necessary financial and technical support, reviewing progress, implementing corrective actions as necessary and regularly informing Member States of the aforementioned, and of any further action required, through the WHO Executive Board, the World Health Assembly and the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean.