

## **One million polio vaccinators, 80 million children, 23 countries: Africa launches largest ever immunization campaign**

*Africans unite across border in massive effort to combat epidemic and get polio eradication back on track*

Transcript of press briefing held at the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, on Friday 8 October 2004.

### **Panellists:**

- Dr David Heymann, Representative for Polio Eradication, World Health Organization (WHO)
- Ms Rima Salah, UNICEF Regional Director West Africa
- Mr Neville Hackett, Past Rotary International Director

WHO - David Heymann

Welcome and thank you for coming. I would like to introduce Rima Salah from UNICEF and Neville Hackett from Rotary International. This morning, we have to speak with you about polio eradication. I would like to start off with a personal story. Two weeks ago, I was in Burkina Faso, where I met with the Moro Naba the traditional ruler of the Mosi people of Burkina Faso. At that meeting, the Mora called together all the traditional rulers asking them to please help to finally rid Africa of polio this year. I then met the First Lady of Burkina Faso, who today, with her husband the President, is launching national immunization days, which we believe we lead Burkina Faso to, once again, be polio-free. The previous day, I met the President in Niger. After our meeting he called together all of the religious leaders and discussed the importance of immunization with them asking them to talk about this in their Friday sermons. The day after Burkina Faso, in Côte d'Ivoire, I met the President who displayed the top level of commitment of their government. I say that because in Africa today, Presidents in 22 of the 23 countries are involved in the launches of national immunization days in these countries.

In addition, last Saturday in Kano, northern Nigeria, President Obasanjo and President Konaré, Chair African Union and the Governor of Kano launched the 23-country synchronized immunization days in West and Central Africa. An important day, when the Governor of Kano committed all of the State civil servants to participate in today's immunization activities. They are however not the only people participating. They are over 1 million volunteers throughout West and Central Africa participating in immunization days. Either mobilizing people across communities, which is what Rima Salah of UNICEF will tell you about or giving two drops of vaccine to children under the age of 5. These people include schoolteachers, parents of children who have had polio or who are at risk of polio, boy scouts helping to bring people to vaccination sites. They include the traditional rulers in each small village, some of them giving drops, others mobilizing their populations, working along with nurses and other health workers making a total of 1 million people throughout Western and Central Africa immunizing 80 million children today.

As you know, Africa was almost polio-free this time last year. Only two countries had polio, Niger and Nigeria. But because of rumours about vaccine safety that were circulating in northern Nigeria and in southern Niger, vaccination activities were suspended. As a result, 12 countries in Western and Central Africa received imported cases of polio from Nigeria. In addition, these countries had not kept up

their polio immunization activities after they had become polio free in the late 1990s, so they were able to have these polio importations in their countries. That's why these synchronized activities targeting 80 million children with one million volunteers are going on. This is probably the largest public health event ever to occur in Sub-Saharan Africa, where under the African Union these people have been brought together to rid the continent of polio.

Will they succeed? To answer that, it is important to look at the history. In 1988, 125 countries with polio, 1000 children were paralysed a day. Last year 800 children paralysed for the whole year from polio in only six countries. This year, we have seen a change with a total of 786 children paralysed by polio so far this year. 688 of these children are in Sub-Saharan Africa. This is a tragedy, because all but two of these countries were polio free, now twelve of them are infected again. We are very optimistic that activities started today will repair the damage that has been done. Already Kano, which has suspended immunization activities, began to immunize at the end of July. Bu yesterday they had already reached 70% of their under fives with at least one dose of polio vaccine. We are optimistic that Africa is showing the world its imminent success in the eradication of polio, and they will catch up with the rest of the world. We believe that if political commitment and technical activities in polio eradication reach the quality that they must reach in Africa and continue with high quality in Asia, the world will become polio free next year.

So the message I want to pass to you today is a very optimistic one. I think you will agree after you hear Rima that the partnership is functioning very well and is doing what is necessary to arrive at a polio free world. So now to Rima.

#### UNICEF - Rima Salah

The resurgence of polio is a public health tragedy that has inspired 23 African countries to synchronize mass immunization. African governments, under the leadership of the African Union, have sent a clear signal that they will not be beaten by polio. To immunize every child in every village, we require full community participation particularly in the poorest and the most marginalized communities. The resurgence of polio in Africa proves that when immunization and health services fail to reach these communities, polio will spread and disease will spread. Unless we make this extra effort to really involve communities, we will not succeed in our endeavour.

To do this, we have to pass our message powerful about the necessity of the vaccination and the safety of the vaccine.

Successful immunization activities are dependent on the ability of the health services to reach the entire population, we will not succeed. To do this UNICEF has mobilized religious leaders, traditional chiefs, musicians, artists and good will ambassadors. To quote the Shehu of Dikwa, in Nigeria, "a big part of our role as religious leaders is communicating and mobilizing people about polio vaccination campaigns in Nigeria and Niger and in the region. Our efforts help raise awareness and understanding about the polio threat. We are important in the fight against polio, because we are always in touch with our people, whether they live in cities or in villages. We are in touch with them in Mosques and we are in touch with them in Churches." This is the importance of religious leaders and that is why on the 18 October in Dakar, there is going to be a meeting with religious leaders, traditional

chiefs from all over Africa, to mobilize them on the subject of vaccination and child survival as a whole. Of course, the challenges we are facing are not easy. The logistics involved in reaching displaced populations in places like Liberia, Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire present a formidable challenge. We are also faced with the technical challenge of keeping the vaccine cold in areas without electricity or easy transport and operating in places with civil unrest, such as Sudan at the moment. However, we are determined to reach every child in every village and every hamlet, and that is why the house-to-house, the hut-to-hut approach is crucial. How are we going to do this? We are using helicopters in Liberia, Sierra Leone, camels in desert countries like Mauritania and boats for countries on the coast. Our one million volunteers will go house-to-house even in war and conflict zones. Most importantly, we are using the media. For two weeks now, we have been working very closely with them, producing TV and radio spots. And in places where they do not even have a radio, we have been using face-to-face communication, talking to mothers, talking to communities. So we are determined and with your help, I think we will reach our goal. I cannot emphasize the importance of the partnership with WHO, Rotary and other organizations.

WHO - David Heymann

UNICEF is an important partner for us. I would now like to introduce Neville Hackett, representing PolioPlus, the polio activities of Rotary International.

Rotary International - Neville Hackett

On behalf of 1.2 million Rotarians world wide, the first and largest service organization in the world, may I say that I am delighted to be with you today to mark Africa's help initiative for children. This week, 23 African countries will synchronize a mass polio campaign. Significantly, 23 February 2005 will be Rotary International's 100 anniversary. We are very proud of that. To try to eradicate polio, we formed a committee in 1985 called Polio2005, to coincide with our anniversary. Dr. Albert Sabin, the famous doctor served as our consultant for two years, but we could not accomplish it alone. And so, in 1998 a partnership with WHO, Rotary International, UNICEF and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention was created. Since then, this partnership, together with governments have cooperated in a way that was once thought impossible, surely a milestone in international aid. In 1980, a thousand children a day were infected with polio. As you heard from Dr Heymann, so far this year only just over 700 cases have been reported throughout the world. It is a story we hope will be completed by the end of 2005. A successful conclusion to this story will be Rotary's centenary present to the world. We cannot contemplate failure. Our commitment is as strong as ever, there can only be one result after 20 years of very hard work – success.

Worldwide, Rotarians have committed US\$600 million to the campaign, but more importantly over one million Rotarians have served on national immunization days. With many doing more than one. This equates to many hundreds of millions of dollars in volunteer hours. So our total contribution will eventually be in the region of a staggering US\$one billion. Many of us have experienced danger. As old as I am, I was in Kosovo, Pristina four days before the war started, helping to immunize children against polio. Sadly, over the years we have lost five Rotarians, one was killed in a helicopter crash, one was killed by a crocodile, one by a landmine and two, we believe, were shot.

As you heard, there is a US\$200 million funding gap. But we have come too far to fail. The eradication of polio will be a fitting memorial to those lost during the campaign and a fitting celebration of Rotary's Centenary. Ladies and Gentlemen, I have a heart full of memories and I would be pleased to answer questions.

Thank you.

#### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

Journalist question: Are you saying that you are now definitely back on track to eradicate polio by the end of next year, it was supposed to have been this year, but that has been deferred correct? Also, are there concerns that something might happen to knock you off track again? And what is the follow-up to this campaign that is look ahead until the end of your campaign?

David Heymann:

Maybe I will start with a few words and then pass to Rima. Let me just clarify the targets. In January 2004, Ministers of Health from the six countries which were still polio endemic set a target of the end of 2004, our target has been 2005 since Dr. JW Lee announced it at the World Health Assembly a year and a half ago. We accepted this target because it helped these countries to mobilize their resources and we believe that it has been very effective in Asia. We believe that Asia is in the last throws of polio eradication. India, in the highest season of transmission, right now has gone for a week and a half without a case of polio which is quite a long time in the high season of transmission. Pakistan is at 31 cases, Afghanistan is at 3 cases. So we believe that Asia is on target for the targets that their Ministers set at the end of 2004 or shortly thereafter Asia will finish the job, if they can continue with their technical and their political mobilization. In Africa, the story is very optimistic right now. First of all Africa did it before – except for two countries, Nigeria and Niger. So there are 23 countries that are starting to immunize today. 21 of those countries did it before and they will do it again. Rima told you about the massive mobilization of people in communities to do this job. At the same time the population of Africa is not as dense as that of Asia, so you do not have to have quite the high levels of protection required in Asia. You need to get well over 90% of under-fives protected against polio. Because of the smaller population, it is not as crucial as it is in Asia. So we are very optimistic that Africa will continue with high levels of political commitment which have been expressed in the past weeks and with technical competence to do the job. Rima would you like to add anything?

Rima Salah:

Yes you have mentioned sustainability, which is very important. That is why the mobilization of religious and political leaders such as the Pan-African meeting to take place in Dakar. At the end of this meeting we will have a call for action, not just for a year or two, but really for the future for African children. And this commitment will see to it that we have services. Religious leaders and traditional chiefs could act as pressure groups, lobbying governments to reinforce their services and accessibility to all children and to all families. While we are carrying out this campaign, we are also simultaneously working on reinforcing health services. We also link this to other child survival programmes, and that is why the theme of our meeting in Dakar is Child Survival.

Journalist question: How much extra money has been spent because of these rumours that caused a delay of one year on a new campaign? And what lessons have the WHO and other International Organizations learned from these facts/rumours?

David Heymann:

Let me answer the first and then I will pass to Neville who wants to add something to the last question.

When the partnership for polio eradication and the countries made their budget, this budget was presented last year for biennium 2004-2005. That budget had a US\$100 million funding gap that we now believe will be fulfilled by G8 countries, who declared they would provide these resources after their Summit meeting in Sea Island, USA. The activities in West and Central Africa which are occurring now will cost an additional unplanned US\$100 million dollars and that's the resources we are attempting to mobilize now. We have had some very important contributions from the Islamic countries, through the Organization of the Islamic Conference are beginning to provide resources for this activity. Because polio today is mainly a problem for countries that are members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference. Five of the six countries that still have polio circulating, that have never interrupted transmission are members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, as are 18 of the 23 countries beginning immunization activities today in Africa. 50% of all children who are susceptible are living in countries that are members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference. 80% of children targeted for immunization in Africa are members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference countries. So we have new partners coming on board with the Organization of the Islamic Conference. This is a very important partnership both technically and financially.

Rima Salah:

Just to add, the mobilization of religious leaders and particularly Muslim religious leaders is very important. Because the communities trust their leaders, and I can safely say that a religious leader and a traditional chief can mobilize people more than a political leader. I saw this myself in Senegal and other countries. When he speaks out they listen to him and they vaccinate their children. That is why we have high hopes.

Neville Hackett

To answer a previous question: First of all funding, as the Chairman has said is a problem. We need I think, US\$200 million dollars to fill our funding gap. After polio, there will be surveillance units - I am sure Dr Heymann can answer this far better than me - which are already in place around the world. They will be needed because there are types of paralysis that are not caused by polio and we will have to check that they are not caused by polio. This will require three years. We need to go for three years without any cases of polio at all, before the world can be certified as free of polio. I think that is important to recognize.

Journalist question: Just a clarification of the figure that you gave in the beginning, Dr Heymann. It seems to me that you referred to last year there being 800 cases. What makes you optimistic about India and Pakistan in particular? You said this is the season of high transmission and there are few or no cases in India in the last week

and a half. But you still have nearly a 100 or 90 cases so far this year, which is substantial. Are you planning any other big campaigns near the end of the year? Why are you so optimistic about Asia? It seems that there is still a problem there.

David Heymann:

Asia is also starting today with immunization days. Asia's strategy has advanced a bit and they are not only using national immunization days but they are using a technique of mop-ups to go and whenever a disease occurs they surround that case with a wall of immunity through immunization campaigns. So Asia is actually doing two strategies, a mop-up for each virus – but again today as in Africa, Asia is starting to synchronize between Pakistan, India and Afghanistan, immunization activities. So we are seeing as Rima said nearly 250 million children being targeted throughout the world this week for polio immunizations. Now I can just give you this sheet afterwards comparing last year at this time and this year at this time. Last year India had 141 cases, this year it is 62 and for Pakistan it was 68 and 31. We are in the high season at very low levels.

Africa cannot avoid an epidemic this year. There are now 597 case in Nigeria. There will be a major epidemic of polio unfortunately in Africa. Because the vaccinations will not stop what is going on. But the vaccination will build immunity in children under five so that by the beginning of next year there will be protection in all people, enough to interrupt transmission. But Africa will have an epidemic this year; they are having it right now.

Rima Sallah:

This is where great mobilization will have an impact.

Neville Hackett:

As far as my experiences in India are concerned, they are extremely well organised. On the first one I went to, they explained that the whereabouts of the vaccination centres are as well known as voting booths. They manage to achieve 95% coverage to achieve a herd effect. Africa is different; it is going to be more difficult there. But I still believe that we are going to do it. It may not be at the end of 2005, but we sincerely hope it will.

Journalist question: you are planning to immunize 80 million children in Africa and you mentioned the figure of 250 million including Asia I in the next four days, is that correct?

David Heymann:

Yes, that is correct, thank you. We will close it here. Thank you to all of you for coming to this important briefing, and thank you to my co-panellists.