



## **Sudan Pushes Polio into Retreat Mass Immunization Drive Launched to Reach 6.3 Million Children**

Khartoum, 15 November - As the latest in a series of major polio immunization drives gets underway in Sudan, the Ministry of Health announced that the polio epidemic that hit the country last year seems finally to be in retreat. The epidemic paralysed 152 children over the course of the last 12 months. But since June, cases have fallen to zero thanks to an unprecedented year-long immunization effort backed by UNICEF, WHO, Rotary International and other organizations.

The National Immunization Days launching today are the seventh of their kind in Sudan this year. The goal is to immunize 6.3 children under five, especially those in the poorest communities and those cut off by conflict. Protecting these children is the key to stopping the spread of the disease.

Dr. Guido Sabatinelli, WHO Representative in Sudan, welcomed the encouraging results of Sudan's intensive polio eradication effort. "From the frightening 126 polio cases in 2004, after an absence of almost three years, just 26 cases have been reported so far this year," he said. "And none have been recorded since June, which is extremely positive news."

Sudanese authorities responded aggressively to the region-wide outbreak of polio, which globally reached 1,486 cases last week, compared with 918 cases for the same period in 2004. All the cases have been concentrated in 16 countries, all in Asia and Africa. Nigeria tops the list, with 550 cases of polio so far in 2005, followed by Yemen with 473.

"So long as even one child remains at risk of contracting this crippling and sometimes deadly disease, we cannot be complacent," said Mr. Ted Chaiban, UNICEF Representative in Sudan. "All it takes is one person with the virus to pass it on to an unvaccinated child." Children are most vulnerable to the virus, which is passed through human feces or water or food that has been contaminated with feces.

In Sudan, more than 5 million children have been vaccinated in each of the previous six rounds that have taken place this year and an equal number is expected to be reached in the round that began today. The immunization drive is crucial if further cases of infection are to be avoided among the estimated 6 million children under the age of five years.

"Our policy throughout 2004 and 2005 has been to completely eradicate polio from Sudanese territory," said Dr. El Tayeb Ahmed El Sayed, National EPI Director in the federal Ministry of Health. The Ministry of Health aims to have no further cases of polio in 2005 and to maintain zero polio cases for the required three years for the World Health Organization to certify Sudan as free of polio.

UNICEF, WHO, Rotary International and the Centers for Disease Control, among other partners, have provided funds totalling about US\$ 2.24 million to support the cost of vaccines, vaccination teams and social mobilization efforts for this round alone. Dr El Tayeb noted that while ridding Sudan of polio is critical, additional resources should be devoted to increasing the routine vaccination coverage of children. Many children remain unvaccinated against the six childhood killer diseases: measles, tetanus, diphtheria, polio, tuberculosis and pertussis.

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