

*Speech*

*by*

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*at the*

*Opening session of the 10<sup>th</sup> IEAG meeting*

*26 March 2004*

*Hotel Le Meridien, New Delhi, India*

Speech by Dr. Samlee Plianbangchang, Regional Director, WHO/SEARO  
at the opening session of the 10<sup>th</sup> IEAG meeting in New Delhi, India, 26 March 2004

Venue: Hotel Le Meridien, New Delhi

Time: Opening session starts at 9 am.

Members of the India Expert Advisory Group, Representatives of Government of India, Partners Representatives, Ladies and Gentlemen,

With great pleasure, I welcome you all to this meeting, and I would like to share a few thoughts with you on the subject under our consideration.

The eradication of polio is a noble goal. It is an international commitment made to secure a healthy future for all our children. I am happy to say that the progress made in India in controlling the spread of the poliovirus in 2003, and our commitment, has put that goal firmly within reach.

In 2002, India reported 1,600 cases of polio, which decreased **seven-fold** to 225 cases in 2003. Among the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal, the three states that reported the highest number of polio cases in 2002, Uttar Pradesh alone had a **fourteen-fold** decrease from 1,242 in that year to 88 cases in 2003.

This achievement in 2003 was expected because:

1. India implemented 2 rounds of national immunization days and 4 rounds of large scale sub-national immunization days as recommended by this group of experts in November 2002
2. The quality achieved in these rounds, as exemplified by Uttar Pradesh, was good because:
  - as many as 35 million children were immunized in the January 2004 NID round in that State
  - only 7% of total houses were missed by vaccinators in this round
  - background population immunity, including that of minority communities, increased from 61% of children in 2002 to 85% in 2003.

Government leadership at state level, and the leadership of the District Task Force had ensured effective partner coordination. The network of community mobilizers that UNICEF established in Uttar Pradesh in partnership with the state government, Rotary, the CORE Group of NGOs was instrumental in increasing community acceptance of the vaccine.

I am sure all of our partners would join WHO in congratulating the Government of India on its commendable work last year in bringing about this promising situation.

Yet, I would like to raise a note of caution. Polio in India remains unfinished agenda for the Government, its partners and the WHO South-East Asia Region. As partners, we need to complete the job of polio eradication as soon as possible so that the children of India, and the whole of South-East Asia, can thrive in a polio-free world.

The polio outbreaks in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu indicate the risks being faced by states, and by neighbouring countries, that have previously been polio-free. This is especially when their young children do not receive adequate doses of oral polio vaccine through the mass campaigns or routine immunization. The risks will remain as long as poliovirus continues to circulate anywhere in India. Certainly there is absolutely no room for any complacency.

Ladies and gentlemen, there remain other key challenges that must be overcome:

- We need to ensure that the strategy of six high quality national immunization and sub-national immunization days, recommended by this expert body in November 2003, is successfully implemented
- The key to this is to ensure that adequate and timely funding is available
- We must strive together to maintain overall motivation and enthusiasm, especially during the hot months and the election period. After all, the upcoming April and May rounds will, perhaps, be the most critical pulse polio immunization activities the country has ever undertaken.
- No time must be lost in the preparation to mount a massive immunization response to polioviruses isolated between the May and October rounds.

For the first time in the history of polio eradication, India has achieved a historic low of 225 cases in 2003. In early 2004, with only 5 cases reported so far, transmission still continues to be at the lowest level.

Now, it is the best opportunity that we have, or may ever have, to interrupt the transmission of wild poliovirus in India.

As active partners, we will continue to extend fullest cooperation to the Government of India to ensure successful endeavours for the achievement of the set target.

We fully realize that this final push to eradicate polio from India will not be an easy task. While commending the untiring efforts of all concerned, I urge all of us to ensure that whatever needs to be done – must be done - to complete the job successfully.

Finally, I wish you all success in your deliberations and look forward to a successful outcome of the meeting.

Thank you.