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A Polio free South-East Asia is within reach: WHO

Yogyakarta, 5 September 2012: Eleven countries in WHO's South-East Asia Region are now on track to declaring the Region Polio free, this was recognized during an event at the WHO's Regional Committee Meeting in Yogyakarta, today. The last case of wild poliovirus in the Region was reported on 13 January 2011 in India making a regional polio free certification possible in early 2014. However, the Region remains at risk with poliovirus circulating in the endemic countries - Afghanistan, Nigeria and Pakistan.

Twenty months without any cases of polio reported in the Region is an important milestone, but the mission has not been accomplished yet. Now is the time for maximum vigil, high levels of preparedness, high quality surveillance and maintenance of high immunity against polio among all children under five years old. This must be done through intensified routine immunization and supplementary vaccination campaigns when and where needed. The recent outbreaks in Asia-Tajikistan in 2010 and China in 2011 - have provided important lessons in maintaining high population immunity as protection against importations.

"On present trends, the South-East Asia Region is set to be declared polio-free in January 2014. This is a magnificent achievement. We must now eradicate polio globally. Medical officers from India, Bangladesh and Nepal are directly assisting countries that are still battling the wild virus. This region has the expertise, bolstered by success, to lead the world in this emergency response. We can and must win" said Dr. Margaret Chan, WHO Director General.

India had been the largest endemic reservoir of polio in the world and suffered the greatest burden of paralytic polio. At times as many as 250 000 cases of paralytic polio occurred in India each year. India launched its fight to eradicate polio in 1995.

“The magnitude of effort gone into achieving the Zero Polio status could be well understood by the fact that during each nationwide polio vaccination campaign, India has successfully vaccinated 172 million children through 2.3 million vaccinators in 202 million households,” said Mr Sudip Bandopadhyay, India’s Minister of State for Health and Family Welfare. “India has several critical lessons learnt during the journey of polio eradication which will act as a guide not only for India but for the entire world in any public health intervention,” he added.

One of the lessons learnt in India was the importance of maintaining political commitment, robust national and international partnerships, availability of quality data, its analysis and use, and evidence-based accountability at all levels of the programme.

“As we celebrate this event, I would like to recognize the heroes responsible for getting us here today. Health workers and community volunteers continue to reach millions of children month after month, year after year. They endure hostile environments, rugged terrain and weather phenomena in their tireless mission to vaccinate every last child” said Dr Samlee Plianbangchang, Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia. “At the same time, it is important to recognize that these achievements can be lost far faster than they were gained. We need to ensure that we continue to strive for the highest standards of surveillance; increase routine immunization and continue to use campaigns to maintain high immunity levels in the community” he added.

The milestone of 20 months without polio has not come easily for WHO’s South-East Asia Region. The main lesson is that there is no single national approach. Experiences need to be carefully reviewed and translated to fit with each country.

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Countries in the Region need to intensify routine immunization, including polio immunization. They must also look for polio immunity gaps and conduct supplementary immunization

campaigns when necessary to improve immunity levels. This surveillance must be both on national and on sub-national levels.

WHO is working with countries to ensure the Region sustains the gains made on polio eradication and achieves the regional polio-free certification in early 2014.

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WHO's South-East Asia Region comprises the following 11 Member States: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, India, Indonesia, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Timor-Leste.

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