



Joint Global Polio Eradication Initiative/IFRC Press Release

AFRICA UNITED IN FIGHT AGAINST POLIO OUTBREAK

85 million children to be immunized across 19 countries

Dakar/Brazzaville, 4 March 2010 - More than 85 million children under five years old will be immunized against polio in 19 countries across West and Central Africa in a massive example of cross-border cooperation aimed at stopping a year-long polio epidemic.

Nine countries in West and Central Africa – Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal and Sierra Leone – are considered to have active outbreaks of polio (i.e. cases within the last six months).

The campaign kicks off on March 6 in these countries as well as Nigeria, Ghana, Benin, Central African Republic, Gambia, Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau. Niger, Togo and Cote d'Ivoire will join at a later date due to political transitions or elections.

Over 400,000 volunteers and health workers will take part in the campaign, which is part of an ongoing response to the epidemic that first spread from polio-endemic Nigeria to its polio-free neighbours in 2008 and is still paralyzing children in West and Central Africa.

This complex logistical operation is largely made possible by US\$ 30 million in extraordinary funding released by Rotary International, a major partner in the global effort to stop polio.

WHO Regional Director for Africa, Dr Luis Gomes Sambo, said the synchronized campaign showed Africa's determination to be free of polio. "From the top leadership to local district administrators in every country," he said, "we are each accountable to the African child – to vaccinate every child and achieve high coverage."

A previous round of campaigns in 2009 did not stop the outbreak completely, as not enough children were vaccinated to stop polio transmission. After years with no polio cases, some countries lacked the necessary skills and experience to respond adequately to the outbreak. New approaches being introduced this year include standardized, independent monitoring of whether children have been reached, better training for vaccinators to carry out the plans fully and appropriate deployment of experienced staff.

UNICEF's Regional Director for West and Central Africa, Dr Gianfranco Rotigliano noted: "With better coverage that leaves no child unvaccinated, these campaigns can succeed in making West and Central Africa polio-free."

This campaign will be repeated on 24 April in the same 19 countries. In between, children in six countries with recent cases will receive an additional dose on 26 March as part of a new Short Interval Additional Dose strategy that has proven successful in rapidly building population immunity where needed. These six countries are Burkina Faso, Guinea, Liberia, Mauritania, Senegal and Sierra Leone.

The Chair of Rotary's Africa Regional PolioPlus Committee, Ambroise Tshimbalanga-Kasongo, said: "We at Rotary are proud to have provided the funding necessary for the March rounds and we call on others to play their part in making Africa polio-free by providing funding necessary for more high coverage campaigns."

To end this outbreak, two drops of oral polio vaccine (OPV) will be administered to every child at the door of every dwelling in all 19 countries. A dedicated army of volunteers and health workers will work up to 12 hours per day, travelling on foot or bicycles, in cars and boats and on motorcycles, in often trying conditions. Each vaccination team will carry the vaccine in special carriers, filled with ice packs to ensure the vaccine remains below the required 8°C.

The ministries of health are supported by, among others, key operational partners, including the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Anders Naucler, Health Coordinator for IFRC West and Central Africa called for all-out efforts: "Hundreds of volunteers from our Red Cross Red Crescent National Societies will ensure that polio drops reach every last child. That is our challenge – and that will be the measure of our success."

- Ends -

Notes to editors:

The Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) is spearheaded by national governments, WHO, Rotary International, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and UNICEF.

Since 1988 (the year the GPEI was launched), the incidence of polio has been reduced by more than 99%. In 1988, more than 350,000 children were paralyzed each year in more than 125 endemic countries. In 2009, 1595 children were paralyzed in 24 countries. Only four countries remain endemic: Nigeria, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The 19 countries participating in this synchronized immunization campaign are:
Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo.

In most countries, the first round is 6-9 March and the second round 24-27 April.

Attention broadcasters: Video footage is available free of charge at www.thenewsmarket.com/unicef and www.thenewsmarket.com/rotaryinternational

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For more information on the GPEI, please visit www.polioeradication.org

To track the progress of the campaign, visit the GPEI Google Maps:

In English, check out http://bit.ly/Google_maps_GPEI_Polio_En

In French, check out http://bit.ly/google_maps_GPEI_polio_fr