

STATEMENT BY BRUNO MAES, UNICEF OFFICER-IN-CHARGE AT THE 2005  
NATIONAL IMMUNIZATION DAYS PRESS CONFERENCE, 30 March 2005

H.E. State Minister Theodros Adhanu,

Dr Tesfanesh Belay, Family Health Department,

H.E. Mr. Kenjiro Izumi, Ambassador of Japan

Dr. Olusegun Babaniyi, WHO Representative

PDG Shiferaw Bizuneh, Chairman, Rotary International, National Polio- Plus  
Committee

Mr. William Hammink, Mission Director, USAID

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Four years ago, a little girl called Rawida was brought to a health center in SNNPR as a desperate last-ditch effort by her parents who had tried everything to cure her from the debilitating disease she had contracted, including going to a traditional healer who prescribed sacrificing a sheep to appease evil spirits who had brought on this condition. Rawida was later confirmed to have contracted polio.

When we, the Polio Eradication Initiative partners, were informed about Rawida, we were determined that she would be the last child in Ethiopia to suffer the crippling effects of polio, a disease that we all know can be so easily prevented. Our goal for 2005 was to have succeeded in our effort to ensure that Rawida was indeed the last case

and that by the end of this year we would be in a position to call a meeting like this to announce, ‘YES, WE HAVE MADE IT, ETHIOPIA HAS SUCCESSFULLY ERADICATED POLIO.’

Polio Eradication Initiative partners, under the leadership of the Ministry of Health, continued the remarkable work that began in 1996 toward that end. Wild poliovirus was absent in Ethiopia from January 2001 to December 2004 and efforts have been made to attain all the certification criteria targets in order to achieve the polio-free status. As all of you are aware, however, our sister agency, WHO, confirmed two cases of wild poliovirus in Tigray region last month.

We are here today to announce that we are not giving up. As part of the continental response to polio outbreaks in Nigeria and Sudan, from where transmission to Ethiopia occurred, the Federal Ministry of Health together with its partners and allies such as CDC, Rotary International, and USAID, WHO, UNICEF, Government of Japan, has prepared an importation response plan and emergency polio immunization campaigns. These campaigns were conducted in November/December 2004 in areas bordering Sudan to prevent wild poliovirus importation and transmission from Sudan. In addition, in March 4 – 7 polio sub-national immunization days were conducted in border areas targeting 3.6 million children under-5 years of age.

In addition, to the Sub National Immunization campaigns, two rounds of House – to – House National Immunization Days are planned, one that is being launched tomorrow and the second round in May, targeting 14.7 million children under five.

UNICEF, as it has been doing since the beginning of polio eradication efforts, is providing all the vaccine (OPV) and technical assistance. All UNICEF health project officers based in the regions for routine EPI and other health projects are supporting this campaign.

There is, however, an immense challenge before us. In order to succeed with the campaigns that will be launched tomorrow, where volunteers will take the vaccines door-to-door in a Herculean effort to ensure that not one child is left out, WHO and UNICEF need to bridge a funding gap of US \$4.9 million to immunize 14.7 million children under 5 during April and May 2005, which includes 1.3 million for vaccines. We are therefore appealing to all our traditional as well as new donors to heed our call and help us in our efforts.

While we focus our attention on these massive campaigns, in order to ensure that polio does not re-assert itself in Ethiopia, we must keep in mind that the most effective means of ensuring that all children are protected, not only from polio but other preventable childhood diseases is to improve routine EPI coverage. In this regard we are encouraged by the steps that are being taken to implement the child survival initiative in Ethiopia.

Adequate human, material, and financial resources must be made available to the program for some time to come to ensure consolidation of the gains already made and to continue efforts to build an effective routine EPI program. As stipulated in the MDGs and the Millennium Declaration, UNICEF will continue working in support of the MOH/RHBs, with a focus on critical interventions for child and maternal mortality reduction in nutrition and health.

One of the MDGs is developing global partnership for development, including social services, such as health services, in countries like Ethiopia. I, therefore, call all donor agencies to finish what we started and reach our goal which is polio free World. Together we will win the fight against polio and I wish all the successes in our concerted efforts and actions in the up-coming NIDs.

These National Immunization days are not only for polio eradication. They are opportunities to strengthen the health delivery system and routine vaccination. They are occasions to improve the quality of services and the skills of health personnel. National immunization days are another reminder that the right to health and survival is the business of everyone: political and religious leaders, administrators, private sector, the media, parents, youth and the health establishments.

Tegelun Eneketelalen

Yi tch al al !!!