

INDIA

COMMUNICATION UPDATE

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Photo: Rod Curtis/UNICEF

A few hundred metres from India's only poliovirus case this year, a mother happily immunizes her child with oral poliovirus in Howrah, in the state of West Bengal. Since the case was detected, monthly immunizations are being held in high-risk areas across the state in an effort to rapidly raise childhood immunity to this crippling disease.

For more information contact: ldesomer@unicef.org

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The June issue will focus on initiatives to protect the migrants and mobile population against polio.

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Where the battle is One

IN years past, if an 18-month-old girl was paralyzed by polio in India in the middle of January, the country would barely notice. Not in 2011. This year, when 18-month-old Ruksana Khatun was paralyzed in Panchla block of Howrah, West Bengal, on 13 January, the nation held its breath.

In India's long history of poliovirus, 2011 is no ordinary year. As of 21 April, the polio-endemic state of Uttar Pradesh – once considered the global epicentre of poliovirus – has been polio-free for one year. Likewise, the highest-risk Kosi River region of neighboring Bihar has had no cases for 14 months. The opportunity is clear: if these polio-endemic states can remain polio-free, there is a very real possibility of India achieving its hard-fought goal of polio eradication.



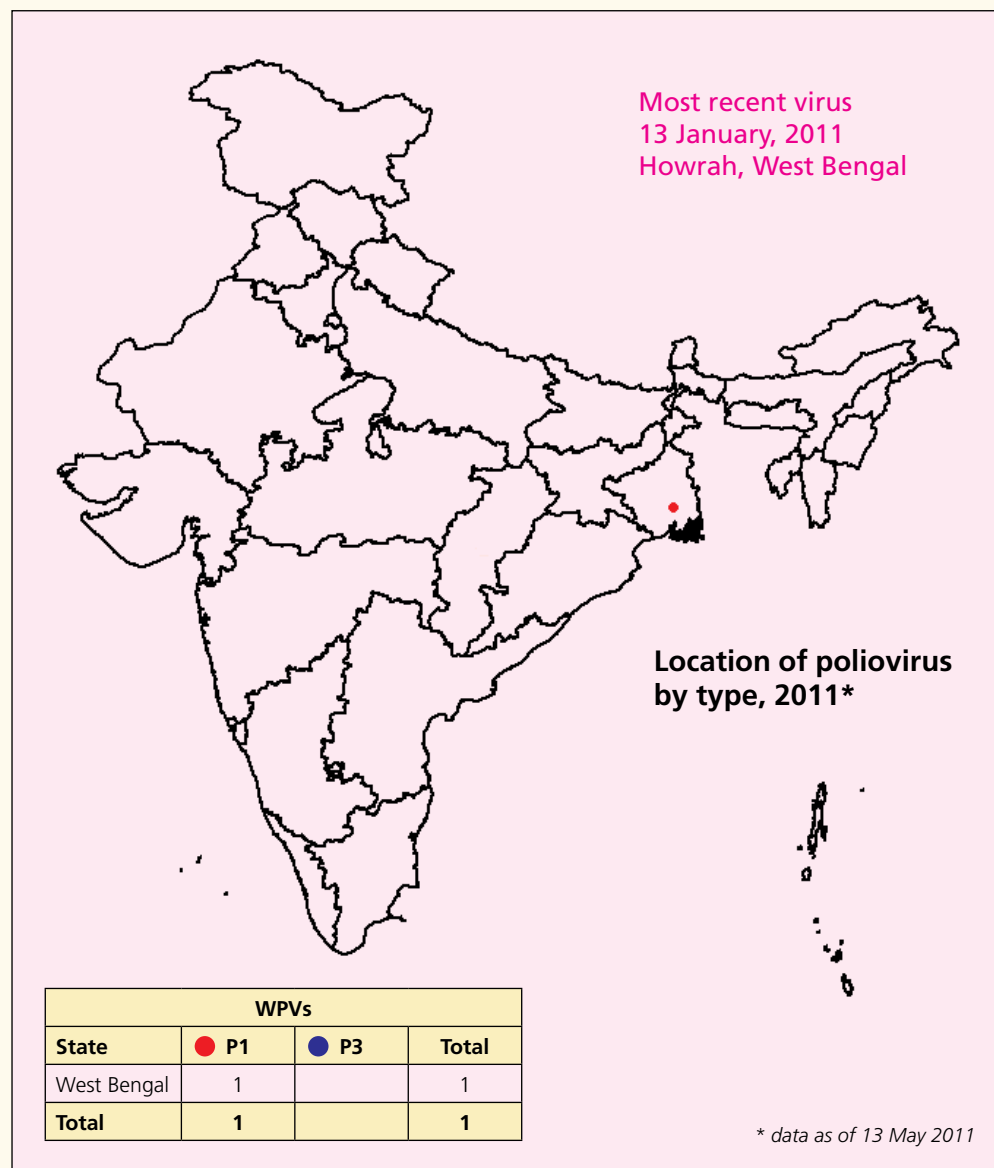
Polio vaccinators: Ensuring no child is missed.

The Government of India has now charged the polio eradication programme with responding to every single case of polio as a national public health emergency and in Ruksana's case, a rapid response was essential. Ruksana lives in Howrah, near Kolkata, home to India's busiest train station, carrying more than 1 million passengers per day. It is likely that trains brought poliovirus to Howrah, and there remains a very real threat that trains could take it out again. The need to rapidly raise childhood immunity to the virus to protect all of India was obvious. The speed of response, however, was impressive – the first mop-up polio immunization in and around Howrah was conducted just six days after the case was confirmed.

"Stopping poliovirus in West Bengal before the start of the high transmission season in the summer months is crucial to eliminating the residual transmission of polio in India," says Dr Hamid Jafari, Project Manager WHO-National Polio Surveillance Project, which is deploying additional human resources in the area to assist the state in implementing a vigorous immunization response.

Four further Supplementary Immunization Activities (SIAs) have since been conducted, despite recent state elections, with increasing numbers of children being reached with every round. Under the leadership of the West Bengal state office, led by Chief of Field Office Lori

India Situation Update



Calvo, UNICEF has increased the number of Field Volunteers employed to support the immunization effort through door-to-door inter-personal communication (IPC) and the identification of key local influencers from 700 volunteers in March to 1800 volunteers in May.

Pockets of resistance to polio immunization are being tackled with focused IPC, with a dramatic upscale in posters and other materials, media workshops, radio advertisements, and the use of the local

theatre group Banglanatak.com, which conducted more than 300 shows in March, drawing more than 40,000 viewers. Local imams have been engaged to support the polio eradication effort, launching the polio booths in high-risk areas and making announcements from mosque loudspeakers asking the community to support the campaigns.

In Panchla block, home to Ruksana and her family, the little girl's father, Abdul Shah, has taken it upon himself to go door-to-door, sharing his experience of the

importance of immunization. Abdul had barred his youngest daughter from being given the polio vaccine and she paid the price for his actions – he now implores his fellow caregivers to learn from his example.

Rotary's National Committee Member for West Bengal, Mr Siddhartha S. Bose, said the immediate response of the polio eradication partnership to the case was "a great credit to all". "The nature and the timing of the emergency response was immediate and comprehensive, with all partners putting in whatever resources

they had to ensure that this is truly the last case and no more," Mr Bose said.

UNICEF's West Bengal Chief of Field Office, Lori Calvo, said that all partners across the State were committed to eliminating polio from its final stronghold in India. "Everyone is coming together to tackle this virus as one. Right now, we have the only case in India this year. And we are endeavouring to reach every last child in West Bengal with oral polio vaccine in the hope that this is India's last case, full stop." ■

Father turns polio advocate

ABDUL Shah, father of the 18-month-old polio afflicted child in Howrah, dons a polio vaccinator's jacket and cap. He is in the forefront advocating for polio eradication at community meetings and gatherings in Howrah, Kolkata and 24 South Parganas. "Please don't ignore polio immunization, make sure your child gets two drops of the oral polio vaccine (OPV) in every round", Shah tells parents.

"I never immunized any of my three children. As a result my daughter has polio", he says. A craftsman living in a village in Howrah district, Shah proactively participates in polio advocacy meetings. At a media workshop in 24 South Parganas on 26 March, Shah requested that his appeal for polio vaccination be publicized to make all parents aware of the importance of polio vaccination.



Abdul Shah sharing his experience.

"I now feel helpless. Polio is irreversible. I know my child will not be able to walk like other children. This should not happen to anyone else," he says. ■

Polio Immunization at Howrah Station during Holi rush

TO mitigate the risk of spread of poliovirus to polio-free states and most importantly to the traditionally endemic Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, polio immunization was carried out at the Howrah train station during the Holi festival rush of travellers.

As many as 422 polio vaccination teams vaccinated nearly 16,000 children at the Howrah train station between 17 March and 23 March. Another 2000 children were immunized for polio at the Sealdah station.

Howrah, from where a polio case has been confirmed this year, is adjacent to other known high-risk areas close to Kolkata with large migratory populations

which heighten the risk of poliovirus spread to other parts of West Bengal and the country. Howrah station handles over a million passengers every day. ■



Protecting children on the move: a child gets OPV at Howrah Station.

'Change Agents' in high-risk areas

AS an emergency response to the poliovirus in Howrah, UNICEF has intensified and expanded community mobilization in West Bengal. Twenty new NGO partners have been brought on board and the number of NGO volunteer community mobilizers more than doubled from 700 to nearly 1800 in a short span of two months to cover as many of the 36 high-risk blocks identified for stepped up operations in nine districts of the state. The challenge, however, has been to rapidly build capacity of these frontline workers to effectively engage with the families for acceptance of the polio vaccine during the intense polio rounds in the state.

These volunteers, the frontline workers or the 'agents of change', play a critical role in the polio programme. They work in areas where families often resist giving oral polio vaccine to their children who



A training session on inter personal communication for NGO volunteers.

remain highly vulnerable to polio due to their social and economic environment and poor health-seeking behaviour.

The new NGOs engaged in Howrah, 24 South Parganas, Kolkata, Mushidabad and Bardhman districts identified volunteers who were local, from the resistant and underserved communities and familiar with the area. These 'agents of change' needed good inter-personal skills, knowledge of the issues they were addressing and sustained efforts to establish their credibility among the community. Their task became more challenging when engaging with resisting communities. The "communicator" as well as the "message" had to compete with factors as diverse as lack of awareness, ignorance, developmental resistance, strong religious beliefs and rumors.

As many as 28 capacity building sessions have been organized, for both new and existing NGO volunteers to plan innovative communication strategies to mobilize parents and guardians in the high-risk areas, particularly those parents who refuse vaccination during polio rounds.

CORE, with a rich experience in mobilizing communities in India's most polio endemic area of West Uttar Pradesh, is extending support in West Bengal. It has started social mobilization in partnership with three local NGOs in two high-risk districts of Howrah and Burdhan from April 2011. ■

Imams lend a helping hand in West Bengal

THE Imams of prominent mosques of West Bengal have joined the polio eradication initiative to rid the state of the disease. Maulana Mohammad Shafique of Nakhoda Masjid, the biggest mosque in West Bengal, appealed to a crowd of 17,000 people at the Friday prayers ahead of the 27 March round to ensure all children up to 5 years of age are vaccinated in all polio campaigns.

"Polio is a dreadful disease and once it catches someone that person never gets cured. I assure you that there is no ill effect of polio drops. I urge all to take polio drop fearlessly", he said to the gathering.

The Imam, who has a huge influence in the community, inaugurated booths in Kolkata and 24 South Parganas and administered OPV to children. "I am happy to play my role and hope it has a positive impact," he says.

The Imam of the state's second largest Tipu Sultan Mosque Maulana Qarik Mufti Alhaj Syed Mohd. Noorur Rehman Barkati Mojeddadi and Imam of Kolkata Idgah Quari Fazlur Rahman have also issued appeals to the community which are being used during community gatherings to get support for polio programme. ■



Nakhoda Masjid Imam inaugurating polio in Kolkata.

Street shows mobilize resistant families in West Bengal

WITH the resistant pockets in West Bengal being a key priority for the Polio Programme, UNICEF partnered with Banglanatak dot com – a social enterprise which specializes in community education and empowerment through culture-based methods in rural India and urban slums – to mobilize families for polio immunization.

As many as 304 interactive street theatre shows were organized in West Bengal from March 23-26 2011, prior to the March 27 polio immunization round. These shows were performed in resistant pockets of Howrah (Howrah & Uluberia municipalities), South 24 Parganas (Maheshtala) with an average audience per show of about 135 people.

To carry out this large production of shows, 15 theatre groups were sensitized on the campaign theme. Between 17-22 March, the groups developed productions of the play 'Polio Palabe' (Polio will be eradicated) under the guidance of theatre workshop specialists, with the script and messaging guided by UNICEF.

The theatre shows targeted building awareness among resistant families

on the importance of pulse polio immunization; breaking myths and misconceptions related to vaccination against poliovirus with respect to number of doses, safety of the vaccine; and mobilizing parents/guardians to get their children up to

five years of age protected with oral polio vaccine drops from any polio booth near their houses.

The theatre project was very successful in involving key influencers in different areas who were able to encourage

community members to go to the performances and participate in the ensuing discussions. In Kolkata's 66 D.C. Dey Road, the Imam allowed the theatre team to perform in front of the mosque and even helped the street theatre group in gathering the local people.

In each of the districts where the theatre was held there was a reported increase in the number of children who visited the polio booth during the round.

The street theatre performances created a public platform for discussion on the importance of pulse polio immunization with parents and other members of the community. The discussions following the performances gave insight on the prevailing myths and misconceptions in these communities and other barriers to polio immunization.

Banglanatak, since its inception in 2000, has worked across India on various health issues - pulse polio and routine immunization, hygiene and sanitation, reproductive and sexual health and disease prevention - to build mass awareness and mobilize the community to take ownership of their own development. ■



Street theatre group performing in a Kolkata polio high-risk area.

Rickshaw Rally rolls out polio message in Lucknow

A colorful rickshaw rally rolled out on the streets of Lucknow on February 26, the eve of national immunization round, to spread the message for polio eradication. More than 100 rickshaws with posters, banners, balloons and some of them with miking and audio messages went through the city urging parents to immunize their children against polio during the campaign.

Uttar Pradesh, said "Uttar Pradesh has made unprecedented progress against polio. Polio eradication initiatives this year are critical to give the final blow to polio in the State."

Lieven Desomer, Chief, Polio Section, UNICEF India, said, "This progress provides an unprecedented opportunity to finish polio in the State and the country,"



These rickshaws carried polio messages for a week during polio round in Lucknow.

District Magistrate of Lucknow Anil Kumar Sagar flagged off the rally in the presence of officials from the state health department, partners and others. Addressing the gathering, Ms Usha Narayan, Director General, Health and Family Welfare, Govt of

Uttar Pradesh, said "Uttar Pradesh has made unprecedented progress against polio. Polio eradication initiatives this year are critical to give the final blow to polio in the State and the country." Organized in partnership with Aidmatrix, the rally culminated at the historical Bara Imambara from where the rickshaws dispersed into the city and carried the polio banners for the entire week to remind parents to ensure that their children receive polio drops. ■

Polio afflicted volunteer mobilizes community

WAVING bright yellow flags, Pappu leads a group of youth volunteers who traverse the narrow lanes of Chakhamid village in Bihar on bicycles, urging parents to immunize their children against polio during the campaign.

"No other child in this village should suffer like me", says 24-year-old Pappu, who suffered polio paralysis when he was a few months old. For Pappu, who earns a living by giving tuitions to students, spreading awareness about polio immunization takes

precedence over everything. Supported by UNICEF's Social Mobilization Network, Pappu and his friends ensure that they take time off for the cycle rally during each polio campaign. A common goal drives them – no child from their village be crippled by polio.

Chakhamid is one of the villages in Bakhri block of Begusarai district – a polio-endemic pocket in the Kosi river basin, identified as a polio high-risk area by the Government of India. ■



Pappu leading a cycle rally.

A million fathers hear the polio message

ONE of the key interventions to mobilize the underserved community for polio immunization in the high-risk areas of West Uttar Pradesh has been to engage religious leaders whom the communities hold in high esteem. Having these religious leaders endorse polio immunization, especially at mass gatherings, not only helps mobilize parents and caregivers but also the community leaders to accompany polio vaccination teams for convincing families to immunize their children.

The Social Mobilization Network (SMNet) in Uttar Pradesh, which has been tapping religious gatherings for polio advocacy, reached out to over a million people this year at the annual Urs-e-Razvi in Bareilly district, a traditional polio reservoir area of West Uttar Pradesh. The annual Urs was held from 29-31 January at the Dargah Aala Hazrat.

The Urs, which draws devotees from across the country and abroad, saw revered religious leaders administering polio vaccine to children and making a mass appeal to the community to support polio immunization to rid the country of the disease.

The Dargah committee official, Haji Javed, administered oral polio vaccine on the opening day of the Urs, while Dargah committee representatives Haji Javed and Maulana Dr Ejaj Anjum Lateefi appealed to the community to ensure that children get OPV as well as routine immunization vaccines.

Banners with appeals from religious leaders and posters with messages on the importance of polio vaccination were displayed prominently at the Urs venue and also on the buses used by the devotees. ■

Facts & Figures

India has its lowest ever rate of poliovirus transmission in recorded history. In 2011, to date, only one polio case has been reported countrywide - from West Bengal. The polio-endemic states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have not reported any polio cases since April, 2010, and September, 2010, respectively.



Polio messages being distributed to the crowd by UNICEF social mobilizers.

