

MEASLES CAMPAIGN KICKS OFF IN CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN SOMALIA *2.5 million children targeted*

Nairobi, Monday, 6 March 2006 - A large-scale measles campaign kicks off tomorrow aiming to vaccinate 2.5 million children against measles in Central and Southern Somalia, UNICEF and the World Health Organization announced today.

The campaign supported by the two organizations will take place between March and April 2006. To ensure the success of the campaign, UNICEF and WHO have put together a strong coalition of partners that includes local and international NGOs as well as community-based organizations. The Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and local authorities will guarantee access and security during the campaign. It will target children aged between nine months and 15 years.

“Data from routine measles vaccination for 2005 indicates that less than 25% of infants were vaccinated before their first birthday and that Somalia has registered very low coverage for all vaccine-preventable diseases since the collapse of the central government in 1991,” said Dr John Lebga, UNICEF Somalia Project Officer for Health and Nutrition. “Since many children have gone unvaccinated, the number of children liable to be affected has increased over the last 15 years leading to serious outbreaks of measles reported annually throughout Somalia.”

Similar campaigns were conducted between the end of 2005 and February 2006 in the semi-autonomous state of Puntland (‘Northeast Somalia’), Northwest Somalia (‘Somaliland’) and Bakool region of Central Somalia.

Somalia has one of the highest infant and under five mortality rates in the world at 132 per 1000 live births and 225 per 1000 children respectively. Measles vaccination coverage is about 38 per cent of children and the disease remains one of the leading causes of childhood deaths in Somalia. It is estimated that approximately 8,000-12,000 children die each year due to measles, representing approximately 10% of all childhood deaths. Measles infection occurs through spread of nasal and oral fluids with the first symptoms after an incubation period of seven to 14 days being fever, nasal discharge, and redness of the eyes.

The campaign that launches tomorrow has two broad aims: to enhance measles coverage throughout Somalia and to provide rapid protection to children in drought-affected areas facing famine and malnutrition. Although the Somalia campaign is part of global measles mortality reduction strategy, the present context in Central and Southern Somalia calls for a more rapid response to reduce mortality from the potential combination of measles and malnutrition.

“Preparations for the campaign have been taking place since 2005,” Dr. Daher Aden, Medical Officer, WHO Somalia, said. “Health workers and support staff have been mobilized, trained and deployed to carry out vaccination in all the key regions.”

The campaign will be conducted in three phases starting with the worst-hit drought-affected regions of Gedo, Lower and Middle Jubba and Bay being covered in the first phase in March; Benadir (encompassing Mogadishu) and Lower Shabelle in the second phase and Hiran, Galgaduud, parts of Muduug and Middle Shabelle regions in the final phase.

About 90 per cent of children in the nine regions Central/Southern Somalia are expected to have been vaccinated by the end of the exercise in April 2006.

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