Myanmar’s first nationwide Japanese Encephalitis vaccination campaign reaches millions of children

With increasing numbers of children across Myanmar suffering from Japanese Encephalitis (JE), in 2017 the Ministry of Health and Sports, with support from UNICEF and its partners, undertook one of the largest public health interventions ever conducted in the country. Launched on 15 November 2017, the nationwide JE immunization campaign reached 13.5 million children aged 9 months to 15 years. Scores of children from some of the hardest to reach areas in the country and most affected by on-going conflict, such as the Wa Self-Administered Division in northern Shan, benefited from this life-saving vaccine. In Rakhine State, amid the devastating violence that affected this poverty stricken region in the second half of 2017, children of all religions and ethnic origins were reached.

Reaching children from all backgrounds in every corner of the country

Organised in two phases, the first phase of the campaign covered schools in Myanmar’s 14 States and Regions. Health teams visited primary and secondary schools run by the Government as well as religious and private institutions and temporary schools in camps for internally displaced people to immunize children.

Those who missed the first round got another chance to get vaccinated during the second phase, when officials setup immunization posts at hospitals, health centres, monasteries and community locations to ensure maximum coverage.

Well ahead of the campaign, mobilization and awareness-raising efforts through mass and social media channels urged parents, teachers, caregivers and communities to help stop the rising incidences of Japanese Encephalitis by ensuring that all children receive the vaccination.

National and international monitors were also deployed across the country during the campaign to support the work of the health staff and ensure as many children as possible were reached.

An effective partnership for vaccination

GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance, the World Health Organization and UNICEF supported the Government to plan and roll-out the immunization campaign, having procured all of the vaccines and other supplies.

“...This disease knows no boundaries, so we applaud the Government’s efforts to reach every corner of Myanmar, so that all children, including the most deprived and affected by conflict, those living in displacement camps and remote communities can benefit from this major and potentially life-saving immunization.”

UNICEF’s Representative to Myanmar, Ms June Kunugi.

About the disease

Japanese Encephalitis is a mosquito-borne disease and can affect people of all ages, but children aged from 9 months to 15 years are most at risk. Since 2012, cases have been reported in nearly all States and Regions across Myanmar, with particularly high numbers and outbreaks occurring in Yangon, Rakhine, northern Shan and Ayeyarwady. Vaccination is the most effective preventive measure.

In 2016, close to 400 cases of JE, a mosquito-borne viral infection, were confirmed in Myanmar: double the number of cases found the previous year.

Endemic in most of Asia, it is estimated that 68,000 people are infected in the region annually, despite widespread availability of an effective vaccine. JE can be fatal in 20-30 per cent of cases. Meanwhile, 30 per cent of survivors are left with some sort of neurological problem or physical disability, such as hearing and speech loss. It occurs mainly in children and most sufferers are under 15 years of age.

The vaccine will be introduced as a routine part of the immunization schedule for Myanmar, given to children at age nine months alongside the measles-rubella vaccinations.
“I believe this is such a great benefit for children living across my country. The vaccination helps protect children against this deadly disease. I believe everyone should participate in this kind of campaign, and I want to encourage parents to read the leaflets and take their children to the nearby posts to get the shots!”

Nang Seng Aung
"I believe this vaccination will protect my children against a disease that could take their lives."

Yex Lawn

Children and their families queue at the designated JE vaccination post in Shan Dong Village, one of the hardest to reach areas in Wa Special Region 2, in northern Shan State.

A moment of distress, pride and love: a little boy receives the JE inoculation while the monitoring team observes the campaign just outside a post in one of the most hard to reach areas in Wa Special Region 2, in northern Shan State.

Yex Lawn, a 35 year-old mother with her two children from Nyaung Ra Village in MongMai, Wa Region proudly posed for a picture after they were done with the JE shots.
A little boy leans on his father after getting a complete dose of the JE vaccine in Shan Dong Village, where UNICEF and partner organizations reached out to children in Wa Special Region 2, in northern Shan State.

A four-year old girl shyly poses for a picture next to her pregnant mother after getting the JE vaccination at a post in No. 9 village, Shan Dong, Wa Region, in northern Shan State.

A mother carries her child while queuing to receive the JE vaccination in the Wa Special Region in northern Shan State.
I remember hearing about children dying from this disease, but now it is very fortunate that the government and organizations like UNICEF have put together an effort to provide this for children like my own. I would like to thank all the authorities and health staff involved in rolling out this campaign and I strongly encourage further health activities as well,”

Ma Aye La, a nurse from the Wa Special Region in northern Shan State.
Spotlight: Across Rakhine State, nearly 667,000 children were immunized

Nestled in green fields, Pyar Lauag Chaung School is only a few miles away from Sittwe, Rakhine State’s capital city. The school has 52 pupils aged from 5 to 12 years – 31 boys and 21 girls. The Headmistress Hla Mya Theia has been working at the school for six years and she has been liaising closely with the local Health authorities and children’s parents to make the Japanese Encephalitis (JE) campaign a success.

With the campaign backed by a widespread public awareness effort, parents at the school have also been exposed to information through television adverts featuring a famous actress and singer as well as leaflets and billboards dotted around town. There were also loud speaker announcements leading up to the vaccination day.

Khin Khin Win, is a 37-year-old mother of two children - a 14-year-old girl who is at a boarding school in Yangon and a seven year old boy, Aung Kwew Min, who is being vaccinated today. She heard about the campaign from her daughter and through the loud speaker announcements that were being made throughout the village.

Aung Kwew Min is shy around strangers, but he whispers to us that he saw the campaign advert on television and then proudly says that he has four friends at school. Before going for his vaccination, he animatedly spells his name in English, his favourite subject.

Aung Kwen Min was one of nearly 667,000 children to brave the vaccination in Rakhine. Despite the ongoing violence in some areas in the northern parts of Rakhine, these included children from all ethnic groups.
During the first phase of the nationwide JE campaign in November 2017, a nurse administers the vaccine to a little girl in Phe-Se village, Maungdaw, Rakhine State.

A little girl from Phe-Se village in Maungdaw, Rakhine State, poses for the camera showing her marked pinkie finger to signal she received the JE vaccine.

“...I understand the importance of immunizing my son against this disease. I don’t want him to get ill or suffer from possible brain damage. I know he is a little scared of the injection, but I explained to him that he might get very sick if he isn’t vaccinated.”

Khin Khin Win

Seven-year-old, Aung Kwew shows his mother Khin Khin Win the completed immunization card.

A little girl from Phe-Se village in Maungdaw, Rakhine State, poses for the camera showing her marked pinkie finger to signal she received the JE vaccine.