

Major milestone reached in global polio eradication: Western Pacific Region is certified polio-free

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Today, an independent panel of international public health experts certified the World Health Organization (WHO) Western Pacific Region as polio-free. The Region includes 37 countries and areas* ranging from tiny islands to the country with the single largest population in the world, the People's Republic of China.

The certification was announced at the 'Meeting on Poliomyelitis Eradication in the Western Pacific' in Kyoto, Japan. The WHO Western Pacific Region is now the second in the world to be certified polio-free, after the WHO Region of the Americas in 1994.

The Regional Certification Commission on Poliomyelitis Eradication confirmed that no new cases of indigenous polio have been detected in the Western Pacific Region in the last 3 years despite excellent surveillance for the virus the major benchmark for certification. The last indigenous case of polio in the Region occurred in a 15-month old girl, Mum Chanty, who was paralysed in Cambodia in March 1997.

Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, Director-General of the World Health Organization, said from Geneva, *'This is a major milestone in the global effort led by WHO, Rotary International, UNICEF and the Centers for Disease Control to certify the world polio-free by 2005. By certifying that this diverse Region is polio-free, we demonstrate that it is possible to eradicate polio throughout the world. I would like to congratulate the countries involved, donor governments, partner agencies, and in particular the hundreds of thousands of volunteers whose time and effort contributed to this remarkable success.'*

Since the Global Polio Eradication Initiative was launched in 1988, the number of polio cases globally has dropped by over 95 per cent, from an estimated 350,000 in 1988 to 7,094 reported in 1999. There have only been 1,481 confirmed cases of polio so far this year. The WHO European Region (made up of 51 countries, including the Commonwealth of Independent States) has not had any new cases of indigenous polio for almost 2 years.

'Today, we celebrate the hard work of everyone involved in the effort to stop the suffering caused by polio in the Western Pacific,' said Dr Shigeru Omi, Director of the WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific. *'Tomorrow, our work doesn't stop. We must maintain our polio-free status through vigilant monitoring and surveillance. We must apply our victory and our lessons learned towards the goal of a world certified as polio-free by 2005.'*

In polio-free Regions, challenges ahead include maintaining certification-standard surveillance and achieving safe

containment of laboratory stocks of the wild poliovirus to prevent inadvertent release. The Western Pacific Region is breaking new ground for the eradication initiative in piloting the Global Action Plan for Laboratory Containment of Wild Poliovirus. The Region will also focus on strengthening routine immunisation programs by systematically building on the lessons learned in polio eradication.

Polio transmission is likely to occur in up to 20 countries after 2000, primarily in West and Central Africa and in the Horn of Africa, as well as in parts of Asia. In these areas, national immunisation days and intensive house-to-house mop-up campaigns are being conducted to interrupt the remaining chains of poliovirus transmission within the next 12 to 24 months.

Three key challenges must be overcome to achieve global eradication of polio: securing access to all children, including those in conflict-affected countries and areas, closing a US\$ 450 million funding gap, and maintaining political commitment in both endemic and polio-free countries.

The Global Polio Eradication Initiative is spearheaded by WHO, Rotary International, the U S Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

The polio eradication coalition also includes national governments, private foundations (e.g. United Nations Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation), development banks (e.g. World Bank), donor governments (e.g. Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Portugal, United Kingdom and United States of America), non-governmental humanitarian organisations (e.g. the International Red Cross and Red Crescent movement), and corporate partners (e.g. Aventis Pasteur, De Beers). Volunteers in developing countries play a central role; 10 million have participated in mass immunisation campaigns.

*The 37 countries and areas comprising the WHO Western Pacific Region are American Samoa, Australia, Brunei, Darussalam, Cambodia, China, Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam, Hong Kong (China), Japan, Kiribati, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Macao (China), Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Mongolia, Nauru, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Pitcairn Islands, the Republic of Korea, Samoa, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Viet Nam, and Wallis and Futuna.