

Editorial**Polio – A Crippling Reality****Dr. Azhar Masud Bhatti**

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Pakistan is one of the four remaining polio-endemic countries. We are a priority country for the Global Polio Eradication initiative for the simple reason that Pakistan is now reporting more cases than those of the other three endemic countries Nigeria, India and Afghanistan put together.

The vast majority of countries in the world are polio free, and for the first time ever, India has had only one case of polio this year. In contrast, Pakistan has recorded 198 polio cases in 2011 - a significant increase compared to cases reported in 2010. Not only has this been an issue internally, but persistent polio in Pakistan places neighbouring countries at risk. New cases in China this year are genetically linked to transmission in Pakistan. All of this underscores the need for reflection. Pakistan has been working for more than a decade to eliminate polio, a disease that threatens our children with lifelong paralysis and even death. Most of us have seen the disease's devastating effects firsthand and inspired by this, we have made enormous progress. The fight to end polio in Pakistan has never been easy. Violence and insecurity, recent disasters and significant population movements continue to pose challenges that are difficult to overcome and are compounded by issues related to governance and oversight.

Yet despite these obstacles, I remain confident that we can eradicate this terrible disease. New strategies have the potential to reinvigorate eradication efforts. Ulama are working to convince families to immunise their children and this has led to a drop in refusal rates. Women health workers are going door-to-door to ensure that children receive polio vaccines. Paediatricians, family physicians and leading partners like UNICEF, WHO, Rotary Pakistan and others are educating families about this disease through seminars and advocacy.

The worst statistics of polio came from the most troubled province, Balochistan, where 74 cases were registered, 23 cases in KPK, 58 cases in FATA, 01 in Gilgit Baltistan, 33 in Sindh and 09 in Punjab in 2011.

Experts believe several factors, war on the terror in the tribal areas, conservative Pushtoon culture, undocumented cross border as well as within the country, movement of people and ineffective programme management – have stood in the way of complete reduction. They believe that Pakistan needs to re-strategize its Polio campaign to achieve the target of Polio-free Pakistan by 2012. We need to develop a sense of honourship among the vaccinators and other staff members involved in the campaign says, Dr. Hanif

Khelji Chief Coordinator of the Rotary Club's Polio Reduction in Balochistan.

Dr. Elias Durry, senior coordinator for the WHO's Polio eradication effort in Pakistan, is also of the view that mismanagement in the main cause of spread of polio in Pakistan without going into details, he says, the fact that the highest risk areas are Quetta and Karachi – both provincial capitals proves inaccessibility is not the major cause for spread of polio.

Durry says, WHO provides technical and financial support to Pakistan to implement the National Emergency Action Plan. Right now it's struggling hard to meet the target of vaccinating at least 95% children.

About surge in the polio cases in Pakistan, Dr. Deborah Bettles MO, WHO Punjab said there might be multiple factors like improper handling, transportation and storage of the vaccine, poor hygienic and sanitation conditions, environmental problems un-skilled staff deputed for campaign etc. Another major factor, she said, might be the missing children, who remained unvaccinated during repeated visits of the vaccination teams. She also emphasized on comprehensive surveillance system, complete doses of vaccination to each and every child and hiring of trained and skilled staff for immunizations.

Mr. Rustim Hoydarovr UNICEF Communication Specialist said the large number of children who remained unvaccinated during each official campaign was at more risk for the polio virus. He said some parents refused vaccination of their children below the age of 40 days. As many polio cases occurred in first 12 months, he said, the OPV must be given immediately after birth. Pakistani media being the major pillar of state has both moral and professional responsibility to ensure that polio eradication is set on top of public agenda.

Pakistan has informally been warned by the World Health Organization (WHO) to control spreading of the Polio, otherwise it would be placed among the countries on watch where the international travelers visiting or coming out of it would be required to inform to the organization under world-body about their movement. Prime Minister Syed Yusuf Raza Gilani has taken the warning seriously and he is asking the relevant officials to evolve line of action to ward off the upcoming threat. The disease has already been eliminated in most parts of the world. Margaret Chan, Director General WHO, who had detailed meeting with Prime Minister Gilani in Davos. The WHO chief briefed Gilani about the apprehensions of the WHO about the lackluster attitude

of some officials and system in Pakistan in controlling and eliminating such disease.

The WHO Director General explained Prime Minister Gilani that her organization and world at large are not interested to create troubles for Pakistan but they would be constrained to impose restrictions regarding Pakistan including on the people who will be visiting Pakistan and coming from there. Such people will have to undergo process of immunization and tests for not being effected from certain diseases. Few countries of Africa are currently facing such restrictions. The cumbersome procedure in question could damage not only the image of Pakistan but cause restrictions on the travelers and that would hamper economic activities with Pakistan and in the country, the sources reminded. Chairman of Bill Gates Corporation who has contributed a hefty amount on behalf of his charity foundation for destroying polio from Pakistan was also concerned about the existence of polio in Pakistan. Prime Minister Gilani also had a meeting with Bill Gates separately in Davos. The Prime Minister who was assisted by his two ministers Ms. Hina Rabbani Khar and Senator Hafeez Sheikh briefed his distinguished interlocutors about the efforts of the government of Pakistan for stamping out the diseases from Pakistan and difficulties coming in the way of campaigns for immunization in different parts of the country due to obsolete customs and illiteracy.

Improved vaccines and technical innovations also offer unique opportunities to maximize gains from immunization strategies. To help bolster these efforts, international partners, including Rotary international, UNICEF, WHO, Government of Japan and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, have lent their leadership and funding to give children in Pakistan and the world the chance to be protected from polio.

Yet these advances are not enough to finish the job. We also need commitment and skilled execution at all levels, from our heads of government to local health workers. We need a civic society movement to create demand and ensure accountability. Polio eradication in Pakistan should not be a matter for the government alone, but a truly shared responsibility. Once this disease is eradicated, we will no longer need to treat children who would have been paralyzed by the virus. This will allow us to save precious resources and health worker time, as well as invest funds in other maternal and child health priorities.

The solutions are at hand. The political will to eliminate polio at the highest levels of government must be translated into tangible, concrete action at the grassroots level with ruthless accountability. If we seize these opportunities - and allocate the time, attention and resources needed - then we can finally eliminate polio in Pakistan. In recent decades, polio cases have decreased by 99% globally, with fewer than 1,500 cases last year. We are close to making this disease only the

second ever to be eliminated, after smallpox. Pakistan can help achieve this historic victory.

Pakistanis have a time-limited opportunity to end polio forever. Safe, effective and affordable polio vaccines have allowed us to get this far in the fight. Our progress proves the value that vaccines provide for our children in Pakistan and around the world. I encourage all parents to take their children to be vaccinated against polio and other life-threatening diseases. Please also encourage your friends, neighbours and family members to do the same. Vaccines can protect your children against disease for a lifetime.

For eradication of Polio we should stress on strengthened routine vaccination of all kinds including Polio. There should be legislation about compulsory immunization and bill should be passed through National Assembly. Birth certificates should not issued without vaccination cards. The Union Council Secretaries would play important role in this regard. Before the campaign there should be registration of all primary schools at UC level and their children under five years.

There will be full involvement of the district governments. Involvement of community at all levels like, parliamentarians, political leaders, Religious leaders, Allied and Aline departments, Scouts, NGOs, primary school teachers, private hospitals, Health healers, Hakeems, Homeopaths, Doctors Associations, Family Physicians, Paedriatians (govt. and private), Gynaecologists (govt. and private), All teaching hospitals (govt. and private), GPs, Ex-Nazims, Imam of mosques, School Health Nutrition Supervisors and female councilors at grass root level. Special concentration should be given in Polio campaigns on Nomadic children, on Moving children, on different Markets and Bazaars, Multistory buildings in urban areas. Before every campaign Macro and Micro planning should be revised. Due and Defaulter lists should be prepared before every campaign. Special teams should be deployed for hard to reach areas, security compromised areas, markets, bazars, and multi story buildings. Before the campaign social mobilization through print media, electronic media, cables and through advocacy seminars should be conducted. Area incharges in the polio campaign should be increased, one area incharge deputed for two to three teams only.

Pakistan needs to put its entire organizational shoulder to the Polio eradication wheel on an emergency basis. So long as a single child remains infected with Polio, the global goal of eradication will not be met. While at it, we must also look inwards to put in place critically needed health system reforms, which will be vital for meeting any development target in Pakistan.

This (Polio) is the crippling reality that we face on ground. The Health of the nation is clearly not well.