

# Massive anti-polio campaign to reach 20 million children across Middle East – UN agency

[UN news.un.org/en/story/2013/11/454962](http://news.un.org/en/story/2013/11/454962)

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Aiming to stop a polio outbreak in Syria from spreading across the region, the United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) is spearheading the largest-ever immunization campaign in the Middle East today, with plans to vaccinate some 20 million children in seven countries and territories against the highly infectious virus.

Presenting a consolidated report on the polio outbreak, WHO spokesperson Sona Bari told reporters in Geneva that the massive consolidated immunization response, which also includes the UN Children's Fund ([UNICEF](#)), is already under way in the region targeting over 20 million children in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey, as well as in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Ms. Bari said the unprecedented response to polio virus circulation in the region includes plans for a six-month sustained effort of intense immunization activity.

"Multiple mass immunization efforts are aimed at protecting as many children as possible," she said, explaining that inside Syria, the campaign is targeting 1.6 million children with vaccines against polio, measles, mumps and rubella.

In Jordan, over 18,800 children under the age of five have been vaccinated against polio in a campaign in the previous few days targeting all children at Za'atari camp and a nationwide campaign is currently under way to reach 3.5 million people with polio, measles and rubella.

Ms. Bari said that in Iraq, a vaccination campaign has begun in the west of the country, with another campaign planned in the Kurdistan Region in the coming days. Lebanon's nationwide campaign would begin later in the week and Turkey and Egypt by mid-November.

Equally important is heightened disease surveillance at the global level, she added, to detect any cases in areas thought to be polio-free.

In late October, [WHO](#) confirmed the polio outbreak in strife-riven Syria, reporting that out of 22 cases of acute flaccid paralysis (AFP), 10 had been confirmed as being the result of Wild Polio Virus Type 1, with other cases still being investigated.

The cases were initially reported on 17 October in the Deir Al Zour province in the north-east region of Syria. Due to the protracted conflict, which has displaced millions, Syria had already been considered at high-risk for vaccine-preventable diseases.

While, the country has not experienced a case of polio since 1999, Syria's immunization rates plummeted from more than 90 per cent before the conflict to currently 68 per cent. WHO says preliminary evidence indicates that the poliovirus was of Pakistani origin and was similar to the strain detected in Egypt, Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Polio, whose virus enters the body through the mouth and multiplies in the intestines, attacking the nervous system, is highly infectious and can cause total paralysis in a matter of hours.

Initial symptoms are fever, fatigue, headache, vomiting, stiffness in the neck and pain in the limbs. One in 200 infections leads to irreversible paralysis and among those paralyzed, five to 10 per cent die when their breathing muscles become immobilized.

Ms. Bari said that emergency immunization campaigns in and around Syria to prevent transmission of polio and other preventable diseases had vaccinated more than 650,000 children in Syria, including 116,000 in the highly-contested Deir-ez-Zor province.

For its part, UNICEF has procured 1.35 billion doses of oral polio vaccine (OPV) so far this year and by the end of 2013 will have procured up to 1.7 billion doses to meet the increased demand.

Global supply of OPV has already been under strain with vaccine manufacturers producing at full capacity. The new outbreak in Syria added further pressure to the supply but WHO, UNICEF and manufacturers are working to secure sufficient quantities to reach all children.

UNICEF spokesperson Marixie Mercado said that inside Syria, the biggest challenge the agency and its partners were facing is how to reach children who have not been vaccinated over the previous two years because they are in areas where violence is taking place and there is limited or no access.

She said that UNICEF's priority in the following weeks was to reach the maximum number of children in such areas. A "small breakthrough" occurred on Wednesday, when UNICEF successfully negotiated on behalf of other UN agencies access to reach Bludan in rural Damascus, an area that has been inaccessible for months. Bludan, which before the crisis had around 4,000 residents, now houses some 60,000, mostly displaced.

She said the UNICEF-led team had to cross eight checkpoints to reach the area. The mission delivered vaccines, syringes, safety boxes, vaccination cards and nutrition supplies including micronutrients, high energy biscuits and therapeutic foods.

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### **UN health agency confirms polio outbreak in Syria**

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29 October 2013

The United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) today confirmed 10 cases of polio in conflict-stricken Syria, adding that health authorities in the country and neighbouring nations have already begun a comprehensive response to the outbreak.