

Polio free South East Asia soon a reality

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Bangalore: At a recent WHO regional committee meeting in Yogyakarta it was announced that 11 countries in WHO's South East Asia Region are now on track to declaring the region Polio free. The last case of wild polio virus in this region was reported on January 13, 2011, in India making a regional polio free certification possible only in early 2014.

Dr Margaret Chan, director general, WHO, said that, "On present trends, the South East Asia region is set to be declared polio-free in January 2014. This is a magnificent achievement. We must now eradicate polio globally. Medical officers from India, Bangladesh and Nepal are directly assisting countries that are still battling the wild virus. This region has the expertise, bolstered by success, to lead the world in this emergency response. We can and must win"

India had been the largest endemic reservoir of polio in the world and suffered the greatest burden of paralytic polio. At times as many as 250,000 cases of paralytic polio occurred in India each year, in response to which India launched its fight to eradicate polio in 1995.

Mr Sudip Bandyopadhyay, Minister of State for Health and Family Welfare, India, said that, "The magnitude of effort gone into achieving the zero polio status could be well understood by the fact that during each nationwide polio vaccination campaign, India has successfully vaccinated 172 million children through 2.3 million vaccinators in 202 million households."

"India has learnt several critical lessons during the journey of polio eradication, which will act as a guide not only for India but for the entire world in any public health intervention," he added.

Twenty months without any cases of polio reported in this region is an important milestone, but authorities say that the mission has not been accomplished yet. They add, that now is the time for maximum vigil, high levels of preparedness, high quality surveillance and maintenance of high immunity against polio among all children who are under five years of age.

This must be done through intensified routine immunization and supplementary vaccination campaigns, when and where they are needed. The recent outbreaks in Tajikistan in 2010 and in China during 2011, have provided important lessons in maintaining high population immunity as protection against importations.

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