

(as of 12 November 2003), representing a greater than 99% reduction.

“This statement by the OIC is extremely important at this stage of the eradication effort,” said Dr Hussein A. Gezairy, Regional Director of WHO’s Eastern Mediterranean Region. “This commitment is vital to wiping out this terrible disease in the remaining endemic OIC countries.”

The resolution follows concerns raised at the World Health Assembly in May 2003 by many OIC countries about the risk ongoing transmission anywhere poses to polio-free countries. Their concerns turned out to be well founded: the OIC resolution coincided with the onset of a new polio outbreak which has spread from Nigeria to neighbouring countries putting 15 million children at risk. Eleven children have been recently paralyzed with wild poliovirus in countries which have been polio-free for several years including Burkina Faso (1), Chad (3), Ghana (6), and Togo (1) and in each case, the origins of the wild poliovirus were genetically traced to northern Nigeria.

“Nigeria is now the country with the greatest number of polio cases in the world,” said Dr David Heymann, Representative of the Director-General for Polio Eradication at WHO. “Polio and other infectious diseases know no national boundaries. We face a grave public health threat, and our collective goal of a polio-free world is in jeopardy.”

In response to the outbreaks in West Africa, WHO launched a US\$ 10 million immunization campaign across five countries in west and central Africa. Beginning on 22 October, hundreds of thousands of volunteers and health workers in Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Niger and Togo worked to ensure that every child at risk in these key countries was reached with polio vaccine. A similar campaign also took place in Chad in mid-November.

Monitoring data from these campaigns suggest that insufficient numbers of children may have been reached to interrupt transmission of these imported viruses. It will be critical that every child is reached during the upcoming rounds of supplementary immunization activities.

On 15 January 2004, the Global Polio Eradication Initiative will launch a countdown to stopping transmission by end-2004. ■

Sarah Jane Marshall, *Bulletin*

Islamic states renew commitment to eradicate polio

The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) adopted a new resolution on 20 October 2003 urging Member States which are still polio-endemic to accelerate their efforts to drive out the disease. The resolution has come at a critical time for the Global Polio Eradication Initiative. Six of the world’s seven remaining countries that are still polio-endemic are OIC Member States — Afghanistan, Egypt, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Somalia.

Adopted by the 57 OIC member countries during the 10th Session of the Islamic Conference in the Malaysian city of Putrajaya, the resolution also called on the international community — including OIC Member States — to urgently come up with the necessary funds to stop transmission completely by the end of 2004.

This landmark resolution has been welcomed by the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, a partnership spearheaded by WHO, Rotary International, US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). Since 1988, when the Global Polio Eradication Initiative was launched, significant progress has been made and today, only seven countries in the world remain polio-endemic: Afghanistan, Egypt, India, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Somalia. The number of polio cases has been reduced from greater than 350 000 in 1988 to 520 reported cases in 2003