

massive polio immunization campaigns in 2004.

Health ministers noted that the success or failure of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative — the world's largest public health initiative — now rests with the governments of the six endemic countries. Polio transmission levels are now at their lowest ever in the key countries of India, Pakistan and Egypt, providing these governments with a rare opportunity to halt the spread of the virus. The first milestone in 2004 toward global polio eradication may well come from Egypt, according to epidemiologists, followed closely by India.

"We have a unique window of opportunity in which to end polio for ever," said India's Minister of Health, Ms Sushma Swaraj, speaking from Delhi. Dr Bruce Aylward, Coordinator of the Eradication Initiative at WHO said that the meeting was extremely important because it demonstrated recognition by the six polio-endemic countries that the success of polio eradication requires high-level government action.

"I think this declaration is incredibly important because the countries are committed ... Polio eradication is no longer a health issue. It is a political issue," Aylward told the BBC.

The Global Polio Eradication Initiative, spearheaded by national governments, WHO, Rotary International, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and UNICEF, has seen an international investment of US\$ 3 billion over 15 years and the involvement of 200 countries and 20 million volunteers. Thanks to these efforts and the renewed commitment from governments of the last six polio-endemic countries, the disease could become the first to be eradicated in the 21st century.

Nigeria is currently the greatest threat to global eradication. In late 2003, immunization activities were brought to a halt in the state of Kano, the last major polio reservoir in Africa, because of unfounded rumours suggesting that the polio vaccine was not safe. With immunization stalled, polio was able to cross the border into Nigeria and spread into the previous polio-free countries Cameroon, Chad and through Niger into Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Togo necessitating a massive immunization campaign across west and central Africa.

WHO confirmed two new polio cases in Benin and Cameroon, both formerly polio-free countries, demonstrating the fragility of progress and the urgency of stopping polio virus transmission in the six remaining endemic countries.

The Nigerian Minister of Health, Professor Eytayo Lambo, outlined the steps his country will take to "dramatically" improve polio campaigns in the first half of 2004, particularly in the northern states where the virus continues to circulate widely.

"We will work together as one — federal, state and local governments, religious and traditional leaders, Christians and Muslims — to reach every child with the polio vaccine," he said.

The Ministers agreed to an all-out effort to immunize every child against polio from early 2004, particularly in Nigeria, India and Pakistan, which together account for 95% of all polio cases worldwide. "There is no room in India's future for polio," said Swaraj.

However, full implementation of the eradication plans outlined by Ministers of Health requires an additional US\$ 150 million to fill the remaining funding gap for activities during 2004 and 2005. ■

Polio will be finished by year's end, say Ministers of Health

Polio will become a thing of the past within the next twelve months said Ministers of Health and representatives from the six remaining polio-endemic countries at a high-level meeting at WHO headquarters in Geneva on 15 January.

Representatives from Afghanistan, Egypt, India, Niger, Nigeria and Pakistan unveiled a bold new plan to immunize 250 million children during a series of

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