Flash back.

15th December 2011 - South Sudan. The Head of the World Health Organization in South Sudan Dr. Abdi Aden Mohamed has assured the government of South Sudan of the organization’s commitment to eradicate polio from the country.

Dr Abdi said this in a joint press briefing with the Ministry of Health, Republic of South Sudan and UNICEF on December 9th 2011 to kick start the Polio Immunization Campaign in South Sudan. The campaign dubbed “Kick Polio out of South Sudan” is the fourth round of the Polio immunization campaign since the start of this year and will begin on 13th through 16th December, 2011. The campaign will take place in all the ten states of South Sudan and will last for 4 days. “House-to-house immunization will be conducted and will target 3.2 Million children under the age of five years”, said Dr Abdi.

Polio is a highly infectious viral disease that mainly affects children under five years of age. It invades the nervous system, and can cause total paralysis in a matter of hours. The virus enters the body through the mouth and multiplies in the intestine. Initial symptoms are fever, fatigue, headache, vomiting, and stiffness in the neck and pain in the limbs. One in 200 infections lead to irreversible paralysis (usually in the legs). Among those paralyzed, 5-10% die when their breathing muscles become immobilized. There is no cure for polio, it can only be prevented. Polio vaccine given multiple times can protect a child for life.

In 2008/2009, South Sudan experienced a huge wild polio virus outbreak which left a total of 64 children paralyzed by the polio virus nationwide. This sad event triggered vigorous responses from the Ministry of Health, WHO UNICEF, USAID, Rotary International and CDC. Since the last outbreak reported in 2008, WHO has supported the Ministry of health, Republic of South Sudan to conduct 19 National Immunization Days (NIDs) and 5 State National Immunization Days (SNIDs) by contributing over 700,000 USD and personnel in each round of NIDs. In total, from 2008 to date, the organization has contributed an estimated 14,000,000 USD towards the NIDs and strengthened the surveillance system and routine immunization.
As a result of these joint efforts, South Sudan has not reported any case of wild polio virus for more than 29 continuous months. The last case was reported from Aweil West County, Northern Bahr El Ghazal State with the date of onset of June 27, 2009. With the 29 month of no case, South Sudan has seven (7) months to go for polio free certification.

According to Dr. Abdi Aden Mohammed, WHO has supported the campaign with approximately nineteen thousand (19,000) volunteers and another 2,000 team supervisors, independent monitors and supervisors who will move from house-to-house and village-to-village across the country, to hand-deliver the polio vaccine to every child under the age of five years. This campaign follows similar activities already conducted in February and March and November.

“WHO recognizes that in order to maintain this remarkable achievement, it is crucial that all efforts are put together to ensure that no polio virus is allowed into the country. This can be achieved by maintaining a high immunity profile among all children less than five years of age in South Sudan” Said Dr. Abdi Aden Mohammed.

He pledged WHO’s support to the Ministry of Health-Republic of South Sudan to achieve this noble goal by ensuring that every child less than five years is vaccinated during this upcoming NIDs. He said “This exercise is particularly important given that only an estimated two-quarter of all children in South Sudan are routinely immunized against polio in the country”. Dr. Abdi also presented a speech on behalf of all the UN family in South Sudan who are supporting the campaign.

In his statement, the Deputy Minister of Health Dr. Yata Luori Logori thanked WHO, UNICEF, USAID, Rotary International, CDC and other partners for their support towards the immunization campaigns and in ensuring that no case was reported for the past 29 month paving the way for achieving South Sudan’s dream of a polio free nation.

In attendance were the Under secretary in the Ministry of Health, Republic of South Sudan, Dr. Dr. Makur Maker Korion, Directors in the ministry of health, Republic of South Sudan, the UNICEF Country representative, Dr. Yasmini Haque and the members of the national and international press.

For more information on this article, please contact:
Dr. Yehia Mostafa
EPI/Polio Team Leader
World Health Organization
South Sudan
ymostafah@yahoo.com

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