

Gates hopes polio will be eradicated by 2018 (Update)

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(AP)—Software magnate and philanthropist Bill Gates, who is helping spearhead a global campaign to eradicate polio, said Thursday he hopes that by 2015 no child in the world will be paralyzed by the disease and by 2018 polio will be wiped out.

Gates said in an interview with the Associated Press that the world is making "great progress" in the fight against polio and there are now only three countries where the polio virus has not been stopped—Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nigeria.

The Microsoft founder, who co-chairs the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, spoke ahead of a high-level meeting on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly which launched the new campaign to stamp out polio forever. Timothy Wirth, president of the United Nations Foundation, called it "the most important international meeting on polio eradication in the last 20 years."

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said eradicating the virus is a priority during his second term, which began in January, and he has put "the strength of the entire United Nations system" behind the campaign

"We have reduced polio by 99 percent worldwide," the U.N. chief said. "Just as the entire world will benefit from polio eradication, the world must now stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Nigeria, Pakistan and Afghanistan to finish the job."

In 1988, when the global fight against polio began, there were 125 countries where children were afflicted by the disease. India, long regarded as the nation facing the greatest challenges, has been polio-free for 18 months, which Ban said should give hope to the world that the disease can be eliminated "even under the toughest conditions."

Gates said in the interview that eradication is "actually quite simple."

"We simply need to get the vaccine drops to all the children, but that means that you've got to have good vaccination teams and good logistics," he said. "And I'm very impressed at the political support we're getting and the ways that we're improving the campaigns in each of those three countries."

As a sign of their commitment to the campaign, the leaders of the three countries where polio is still a health issue attended the meeting.

Wirth said so far this year there have only been 17 polio cases in Afghanistan compared with 80 last year, "so progress being made is impressive."

Afghan President Hamid Karzai said "Afghanistan will strive harder and harder and harder, and hopefully we will win, sooner rather than later."

Nigeria has been confronting opposition to the polio vaccine, especially in areas of the Muslim-dominated north where a minority of people believe it will cause harm.

Nigeria's President Goodluck Jonathan said there was polio in 26 of the country's 36 states in 2008 but now there are just 11 that have localized incidents. He said there are still "some cultural issues" and the government is meeting with religious, traditional and political leaders as well as opinion-makers to get the word out that vaccinations are not

harmful and save children from paralysis.

"As the president of Nigeria today, I am totally committed that by 2015 when my present term will end polio will be eradicated in my country," he pledged.

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari said eradicating polio "is a national priority for Pakistan." His daughter is working as a goodwill ambassador for the campaign, which in the past year has seen a two-thirds reduction in cases.

"Eradication has not been easy," he said, noting that the immunization program has gotten "entangled in international politics" and that floods and security issues have prevented health workers from conducting vaccinations.

Gates said the campaign needs to come up with a long-term plan that covers the next six years.

"We're hopeful that by 2015 no more children will be paralyzed," he said. "We need time to really make sure and do the certification. But we think we're only maybe two or three years away from no child being hurt by this disease."

"Then, by 2018, we'd have the certification that this, like smallpox, is now the second disease to be eradicated," Gates said.

Before that, the campaign needs to mobilize additional support.

The Islamic Development Bank, a new donor to the polio eradication effort, announced a three-year \$227 million financial package for Pakistan which will cover the majority of the country's polio vaccination campaign costs. It also announced a \$3 million grant for polio

eradication activities in Afghanistan.

Rotary International, the biggest and earliest supporter, has already given \$1.2 billion to eradicate polio and announced a new contribution of \$75 million over the next three years.

"We must seize the advantage by acting immediately, or risk breaking our pledge to the world's children," said Wilfrid Wilkinson, chair of Rotary Foundation's Trustees.

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