

Syria government vows to vaccinate all children

November 4 2013, by Albert Aji



In this image taken from video obtained from the Shaam News Network, which has been authenticated based on its contents and other AP reporting, a Syrian man looks at smoke leaping the air after a missile hit the eastern countryside of Homs, Syria, on Monday, Nov. 4, 2013. (AP Photo/Shaaam News Network via AP video)

A senior Syrian official vowed Monday that authorities would vaccinate the country's children against polio after 10 cases emerged in the northeast, saying the government would work with international organizations to ensure even rebel-held areas were reached.

A week earlier, the U.N. health agency confirmed the first outbreak of the disease in the country in 14 years, raising a risk of it spreading throughout the region. The confirmed cases are among babies and toddlers who were "under-immunized," according to the World Health Organization.

"We intend to vaccinate each Syrian child regardless of the area they are present in, whether it is a hotspot or a place where the Syrian Arab Army is present," deputy foreign minister Faisal Mekdad told reporters in Damascus. "We promise that we will give opportunity to humanitarian organizations to reach every Syrian child."

Mekdad did not say, however, when the vaccination campaign would begin or how exactly it would reach rebel-held areas.

Aid groups have called for cease-fires to allow immunization campaigns. Syria's warring parties have held truces before to allow civilians to flee and aid to enter some areas.

The polio virus usually infects children in unsanitary conditions through consuming food or drink contaminated with feces. It attacks the nerves and can kill or paralyze, spreading widely and unnoticed before it starts crippling children.

The minister also defended the government against claims they were blockading rebel-held areas. He said there had been attempts to extend food and supplies to civilians in certain areas under rebel control.

Mekdad also noted that Syrian rebels were blockading villages considered loyal to the government of President Bashar Assad, including Nubul and Zahra in the northern Aleppo province.



In this image taken from video obtained from the Shaam News Network, which has been authenticated based on its contents and other AP reporting, Syrians look at damages after a missile hit the eastern countryside of Homs, Syria, on Monday, Nov. 4, 2013. (AP Photo/Shaaam News Network via AP video)

Hard-line Sunni rebels blockade those two Shiite-dominated villages.

Sectarianism is increasingly on the rise in Syria's three-year conflict.

On Monday, a suicide bomber detonated an explosives-laden truck in a central Shiite Syrian village, killing six people, state media reported.

Three children and a woman were among the dead in the early morning bombing at a school in Sabtiyeh, near the city of Homs, official news agency SANA said.

Footage aired on state television showed panicked residents rushing to ambulances carrying wounded children.

"What did these [children](#) do to be killed?" a man angrily shouted.

No group claimed responsibility for the blast, but such bombings are the hallmark of al-Qaida linked groups who have joined Syrian rebels battling to overthrow the Assad's rule.



In this image taken from video obtained from the Shaam News Network, which has been authenticated based on its contents and other AP reporting, black smoke billows the air from heavy shelling in the Damascus country side of Daraya, Syria, on Monday, Nov. 4, 2013. (AP Photo/Shaaam News Network via AP video)

Syria's war began as mostly peaceful demonstrations but transformed into an armed rebellion after government troops violently suppressed demonstrations. The country is formed of a mosaic of different sects, and the conflict has largely split it along sectarian lines. Rebels are overwhelmingly Sunni Muslims, while Christians and other Muslim sects

have for the most part either stood with Assad's [government](#) or remained neutral or involved in peaceful activism.

Hard-line Sunni brigades, some formed of foreign fighters, have powerful fighting units. Shiite fighters from Lebanon's Hezbollah militia and from Iraq have shored up Assad's forces, in part to protect their minority and holy sites in Syria.

All warring sides have used sectarian incitement and have blockaded civilians in villages seen as loyal to their adversaries.

But attacks specifically targeting [civilians](#) of other sects are infrequent, said Rami Abdurrahman of the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which monitors the uprising through a network of activists on the ground.



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Abdurrahman said he believed the Shiite village was targeted because of its sectarian affiliation since no fighting had been reported there previously, adding that it is known for having good relations with nearby Sunni communities.

Syria's Shiite Muslims form a tiny minority scattered in villages, making them particularly vulnerable.

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