

India celebrates victory over polio (Update)

February 11 2014, by Adam Plowright

Indian leaders celebrated the eradication of polio on Tuesday, reminding doubters that something once thought impossible had been achieved and promising to tackle other diseases which still blight the country.

In January, the country of 1.2 billion people marked three years without a new case of the crippling virus, which means it will soon be certified as having wiped out the scourge.

At a function attended by the president and other dignitaries, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh thanked the more than two million vaccinators who criss-crossed the country to help bring about the milestone.

"It is a day we have worked for tirelessly and awaited anxiously. Now it has dawned, it gives us great pride," Singh told an audience in a New Delhi stadium.

His speech came on the same day Afghanistan announced a three-year-old girl from Kabul had contracted polio, the capital's first case since the Taliban were ousted in 2001.

Polio is a virus spread through faecal matter that affects the central nervous system and can leave its victims with withered limbs, paralysed or dead.

There is no cure but it can be prevented through mass vaccination programmes which target the under-fives.

'Serve as an example'

India's poor sanitation, mass internal migration and dilapidated public health system made many experts believe it would be the last country to eradicate the disease, if at all.

"I sincerely hope that what we have been able to do will serve as an example and give the global community confidence that polio will be erased from the face of the earth in the same way as smallpox," Singh said.

"It is our duty to follow the path laid by this programme to other (public health) areas," he added.

There are now only three countries where polio is endemic—Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nigeria—and health workers say steady progress is being made towards global eradication.

Isolated polio outbreaks in the Horn of Africa and war-racked Syria emerged as new causes for concern in 2013, however, and polio vaccination workers in Pakistan are still being killed by the Taliban.

On Tuesday Kaneshka Baktash Turkistani, a spokesman for the Afghan public health ministry, said a three-year-old girl from a nomadic family living on the northeastern edge of Kabul was diagnosed with polio after being admitted to hospital in neighbouring Pakistan.

Turkistani said it was not clear whether she had contracted the virus in the capital or Pakistan.

"After this, we launched an emergency polio campaign in Kabul and luckily so far, we have not found any other cases of polio," he said.

The head of the World Health Organization (WHO), Margaret Chan, said that India had proved its doubters wrong.

"India has shown to the world that there is no such thing as impossible," she said.

The wretched sight of crippled street hawkers or beggars on wheeled trolleys will also endure in India as a legacy of the country's time as an epicentre of new cases.

In the absence of official data, most experts agree there are several million survivors left with withered legs or twisted spines who face discrimination and often live on the margins of society.

India reported 150,000 cases of paralytic polio in 1985 and still accounted for half of all cases globally in 2009, with 741 infections that led to paralysis.

In 2010 the number of victims fell to double figures before the last case on January 13, 2011, when an 18-month-old girl in a Kolkata slum was found to have contracted it.

The girl, Rukshar Khatoon, is now attending school and leads a "normal life", although she still suffers pain in her right leg, doctors and her parents have told AFP.

Official certification by the WHO that India has eradicated polio is likely to come at the end of next month.

"Let us go from here today committed to bringing the same determination to bear on the other diseases that are still a burden on people and our children," the head of the ruling Congress party, Sonia Gandhi, told the celebration Tuesday.

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