

Pakistan to set up polio vaccination points at airports (Update)

May 6 2014

Pakistan will set up mandatory immunisation points at airports to help stop its polio outbreak spreading abroad, officials said Tuesday, though a health minister said the move played into the Taliban's hands.

The World Health Organisation warned on Monday that the crippling disease has re-emerged as a public health emergency—with the virus currently affecting 10 countries worldwide and endemic in three including Pakistan—and urged infected nations to implement vaccine requirements for all international travel.

"Special measures will include establishing mandatory immunisation counters on all airports, border crossings and seaports for all travellers," said Pakistani government spokesman Sajid Ali Shah.

Saira Afzal Tarar, state minister for Health Sciences Regulation and Coordination, said officials had yet to work out the details of when and how the policy would be implemented.

"Passengers travelling abroad now should not worry about it," she told AFP, adding that the government would hold a meeting on Wednesday with provincial ministers and health officials to discuss the vaccination programme, and had already reached out to religious scholars.

But she accused the WHO of playing into the Taliban's hands, saying the health body's recommendations had isolated Pakistan and would make life harder for ordinary Pakistanis—thereby helping the militants

achieve their goals.

"By recommending travel restrictions on Pakistan, the WHO has strengthened those forces who actually banned polio drops," she said.

The Taliban and other militants violently oppose polio vaccination campaigns—seeing them as a cover for foreign spying—and regularly attack immunisation teams, killing some 56 people since December 2012.

Widespread public fears that the vaccine leads to infertility have also contributed to a re-emergence of the disease in Pakistan.

Pakistan recorded 91 cases of polio last year, according to the WHO, up from 58 in 2012. It has also recorded 59 of the world's 74 cases this year.

Militants' opposition to immunisation has increased since Pakistani doctor Shakil Afridi helped the CIA track down terror chief Osama bin Laden in 2011 through a fake vaccine project.

Tarar blamed the surge of cases in Pakistan mainly on "a reaction to the Afridi case".

The WHO had called on Pakistan, Cameroon and Syria—seen as posing the greatest risk of exporting wild poliovirus—to ensure all residents and long-term visitors receive a polio vaccine between four weeks and a year before travelling abroad.

For urgent travel, at least one vaccine dose should be given before departure, according to the emergency committee, which also called for all travellers to be given certificates proving they have been immunised.

Government spokesman Sajid Ali Shah said it had not yet been decided whether long-term non-Pakistani residents would also be subjected to the new rules.

Last month officials announced they would begin administering polio drops to children at security checkpoints in the country's lawless tribal belt.

Polio—a crippling and potentially fatal viral disease that mainly affects children under the age of five—has come close to being beaten as the result of a 25-year effort.

India, which recently celebrated the eradication of the disease, announced in December it would require Pakistanis to obtain vaccination certificates six weeks before cross-border travel.

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