

UN undertakes polio vaccination campaign in Iraq

August 18 2014, by Bram Janssen



An Iraqi internally displaced Yazidi child receives a polio vaccine at the town of Khanke, outside Dahuk, 260 miles (430 kilometers) northwest of Baghdad on Sunday, Aug. 17, 2014. The Yazidis are a centuries-old religious minority viewed as apostates by the Islamic State group, which has claimed mass killings of its opponents in Syria and Iraq. Tens of thousands of Yazidis fled earlier this month when the Islamic State group captured the town of Sinjar, near the Syrian border. (AP Photo/Khalid Mohammed)

The United Nations said Monday it was undertaking a mass polio

vaccination campaign in Iraq, hoping to reach millions of children as the highly contagious virus crosses from Syria into neighboring countries.

The U.N. is trying to reach 4 million [children](#) under 5 throughout Iraq. The campaign was launched after two cases of [polio](#) were discovered in Baghdad earlier this year, said Jeffery Bates of the U.N.'s child agency, UNICEF.

Bates said the polio cases in Iraq likely crossed over from Syria, where the country's civil war has disrupted its health care system and some children have not been immunized against the highly contagious virus that can paralyze or kill.

"It was just a matter of time before it worked its way across the border into Iraq," said Bates in the city of Irbil, capital of the largely autonomous Kurdish areas of northern Iraq. "The two cases we found in Baghdad were closely related to the Syrian virus."

Polio usually strikes children under 5 and is most often spread through infected water. There is no specific cure, but several vaccines exist.

The U.N. is struggling to reach children in territory held by militants of the Islamic State group, which have seized large swaths of Iraq, including its second-largest city of Mosul. The constant flux of tens of thousands of displaced Iraqis moving around the country fleeing the extremists also is a problem, Bates said.



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"We can't get into some areas due to security. (Others) are on the move ... (and) when we do outreach, we're unable to find them," he said.

The U.N. estimates that there are nearly 1.5 million displaced Iraqis in the country, most who fled their home as the Islamic State militant group began their sweep into western and northern Iraq in June.



An Iraqi internally displaced Yazidi child waits to receive a polio vaccine shot at a clinic in the town of Khanke, outside Dahuk, 260 miles (430 kilometers) northwest of Baghdad on Sunday, Aug. 17, 2014. The Yazidis are a centuries-old religious minority viewed as apostates by the Islamic State group, which has claimed mass killings of its opponents in Syria and Iraq. Tens of thousands of Yazidis fled earlier this month when the Islamic State group captured the town of Sinjar, near the Syrian border. (AP Photo/Khalid Mohammed)

For the first time ever, the World Health Organization in May declared the spread of polio an international public health emergency that could grow worse and unravel the nearly three-decade effort to eradicate the crippling disease.

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