

Polio incidence hits 15-year high in Pakistan

November 5 2014, by Munir Ahmed

The incidence of polio in Pakistan hit a 15-year high on Wednesday, as the prime minister vowed to rid the country of the crippling disease in the next six months despite a Taliban campaign to kill workers distributing vaccines for it.

Dr. Elias Durray, who heads the World Health Organization's polio eradication efforts in Pakistan, told The Associated Press that authorities have already registered 235 polio cases since January. WHO data showed that the last time numbers were higher than that was in 1999, when 558 cases were documented.

Pakistan is among the world's only three countries where polio, which can cause paralysis and death, remains endemic. Militants regularly target vaccination teams in tribal areas bordering Afghanistan and elsewhere in the country, accusing polio vaccine workers of acting as spies for Washington and saying the vaccines make boys sterile.

The disease, which mainly affects children, struck thousands of Pakistanis in the 1980s, but after a long-running vaccination drive it fell to its lowest point yet—28 cases—in 2005, the figures show. After that, Taliban threats and attacks set infection rates on the rise.

"We refuse to see our children getting disabled for life," Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said in a statement during a high-level meeting on the subject in the capital, Islamabad. "We will make Pakistan a polio-free country in the next six months," he added.

Local militants in the country's North Waziristan tribal region banned polio prevention teams from the area in 2012, stopping vaccinations and driving the resurgence of the disease, which hits the area disproportionately. Across the country, militants have killed about 60 workers and police escorting polio teams since then.

A major government offensive that began last summer has driven many most militants from the area, however, and displaced some 800,000 people who now can be vaccinated in more accessible areas, said Aziz Memon, a senior official at service organization Rotary International.

"I think Pakistan can eradicate polio through properly conducted anti-polio campaigns. Now it is quite easy to vaccinate those children who missed the campaign since 2012 because of militant threats to the polio workers in North Waziristan and elsewhere in northwest Pakistan," Memon told the AP.

He said Rotary would also play an active role to ensure the eradication of polio in Pakistan.

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