

Nigeria on 'relentless' drive to eradicate polio

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Nigeria will not relent in its campaign to stamp out polio until the crippling disease is completely eradicated, President Muhammadu Buhari said Monday.

"The federal government will sustain the current momentum and... continue to regard this campaign as an emergency until we are declared polio-free," Buhari said during a visit by World Health Organization (WHO) regional director for Africa, Matshidiso Moeti.

Moeti was in Nigeria for her first visit to the country since the WHO last month removed it from the list of countries where polio is endemic.

Delisting is a first step towards being declared free of the disease, which is spread by poor sanitation and contaminated water and can cause irreversible paralysis.

Buhari said efforts to eradicate the disease, begun in 1998, had taken a toll "in terms of human and material resources" in Africa's most populous country.

"We are however not relenting as we are determined to achieve our collective goal of saving our children from further paralysis from polio," he said, according to a copy of his remarks released by the president's office in Abuja.

Nigeria, which marked one year since its last case of polio was recorded on July 24, has had to battle major security issues in its efforts to

vaccinate children in areas of the remote northeast hit by Boko Haram's bloody six-year Islamist insurgency.

It has also had to overcome rumours that the vaccine caused infertility, leading to many parents, particularly in the Muslim-majority north, refusing to have their children immunised.

Similar issues have plagued health workers in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the only countries remaining on the WHO list of polio-endemic countries.

Moeti, the first woman WHO Regional Director for Africa, said the organisation "will assist Nigeria to sustain this status for the next two years to enable it receive full certification of a polio-free nation."

Those involved in Nigeria's immunisation programme say sustained political commitment and funding, as well as support from traditional rulers and religious leaders, have helped the tide in Nigeria.

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