

New polio cases in Afghanistan as coronavirus halts immunisation

June 14 2020

Afghanistan has detected polio in areas previously declared free of the life-threatening disease after immunisation programmes were paused due to the coronavirus pandemic, officials said Sunday.

The [polio virus](#) has spread to three provinces that had not reported cases for up to five years, said Jan Rasekh, a spokesman for Afghanistan's polio eradication programme.

Balkh, Herat and Badakhshan have each declared a single case.

Although the number of new cases nationwide is lower so far this year—with 14 compared to 26 in 2019—the location has sparked concern.

"We had worked hard for years and cornered polio to a limited geography," Rasekh said.

"The coronavirus has helped polio spread beyond its endemic region of south and southeast, and now threatens people across the country," he added.

The UN children's agency UNICEF said last month that polio eradication drives had been suspended in dozens of countries, while measles vaccination campaigns were also put on hold in 27 nations.

There are only two nations remaining where the wild version of the polio

virus continues to spread—Pakistan and Afghanistan—but a strain that has mutated from the vaccine itself has caused outbreaks in Africa.

Up to 10 nationwide [polio immunisation](#) drives are usually completed in Afghanistan every year.

But only two missions were carried out before the outbreak of coronavirus, Rasekh said, adding that he hopes they can resume in July.

The Taliban continues to ban authorities from conducting house-to-house campaigns—the most effective way to fight the virus—in areas it controls, he added.

Polio immunisation is compulsory in Afghanistan as [government policy](#), but distrust of vaccines is rife.

But the Taliban and [religious leaders](#) often tell communities that vaccines are a Western conspiracy aimed at sterilising Muslim children, and believe immunisation drives are used for spying on militant activities.

Afghan authorities, meanwhile, are grappling with surging cases of [coronavirus](#), as authorities struggle to impose a nationwide lockdown to curb its spread.

Afghanistan has so far declared more than 24,500 confirmed COVID-19 cases with 471 deaths.

Experts say the actual number of cases is likely higher given limited testing capacity.

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