

World Health Organization declares public health emergency over spread of polio

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On Monday, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) over the reported recent spread of polio, primarily of a virus of Pakistani origin, throughout the Middle East.

The designation, unanimously proposed by the group's Emergency Committee session on April 28-29, requires that the event "constitute a public health risk to other States through the international spread of disease," and "potentially require a coordinated international response." This is only the second time that a PHEIC has been declared, after the first was declared during the H1N1 (commonly known as "swine flu") epidemic in 2009.

Pakistan, Cameroon, and Syria were singled out as posing the greatest risk of exporting the virus in 2014. Underscoring the severity of the spread of the Pakistani virus since 2013, WHO experts told reporters over a conference call that cases had already been documented in Israel, Iraq and Syria. According to Dr. Bruce Aylward, WHO's Assistant Director-General, at the May 5 press conference, "the Pakistan virus ... was also found at one point in the sewage in the West Bank in Gaza. And as recently as December this year, that virus was also found in greater Cairo sewage. It was virus from Pakistan which also caused the outbreak in China two years ago as well."

The recent outbreaks are particularly worrying as they have occurred outside of the disease's usual peak transmission season during the summer. WHO's official recommendation is that affected countries declare a public health emergency, and that residents of the affected countries receive documented vaccinations before traveling abroad.

A highly infectious viral disease for which young children are particularly at risk, polio attacks its

victims' nervous systems, causing permanent paralysis and even death in a minority of cases. As it spreads primarily through fecal-oral transmission, it thrives on unsanitary conditions, such as lack of food and water sanitation. Although the polio vaccine has been available since the 1950s, there is no cure once it is contracted. Ninety percent of people infected with polio appear asymptomatic, meaning that they exhibit no symptoms at all.

Although polio has been known since antiquity, the spread of the disease became most acute in the beginning of the 20th century, when it began to reach epidemic proportions. In 1988, the Global Polio Eradication Initiative was launched by the WHO, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and Rotary International. Since then, polio has been successfully eradicated in most of the world's countries containing 80 percent of the world's population, and instances of the disease have declined by 99 percent. Today, it is endemic in only three countries: Afghanistan, Pakistan and Nigeria.

The sudden reappearance of the disease in the Middle East and Central Asia, after it had thought to have been under control and nearly eradicated, is the result of a public health crisis caused by imperialist intervention in the region led by the United States.

Pakistan is the only country that is not expected to meet its targets for eradicating polio, according to the WHO. It has accounted for 59 of the 74 new recorded cases of the disease in 2014, and 46 of those have come from the war-torn Federally Administered Tribal Areas, which has been the site of most of the American drone strikes and "anti-terror" operations within Pakistan. What healthcare infrastructure had existed in this most vulnerable area of the country has been blown apart by imperialist operations. Particularly significant in this

regard was the revelation that the CIA had posed as a vaccination team to gain entrance to Osama bin Laden's compound, after which aid workers were thrown out of Taliban-controlled areas and subject to violent attacks as suspected US spies.

It is significant that Syria was singled out by the WHO as being at risk for exporting polio. The conditions produced by that country's US-organized civil war, with its presence of foreign jihadists among the "rebels," the general collapse of Syrian healthcare and pharmaceutical industries and the enormous refugee and displaced population created by the war, have made it a potential epidemiological lightning rod.

Significantly, a Reuters article last year estimated that "hundreds" of Pakistani Taliban fighters are present in Syria. The Pakistani government, for its part, has recently begun providing the rebels with weapons, under pressure from Saudi Arabia. Polio vaccination rates in Syria have plummeted from a pre-war level of 90 percent to around 68 percent. Meanwhile, around 2.4 million Syrians have been made refugees by the conflict, hundreds of thousands of whom live in unsanitary conditions in sprawling refugee camps throughout the Levant and eastern Mediterranean.

The funding to eradicate polio has come almost entirely from private sources and is thus continually in jeopardy. When the WHO unveiled a \$5.5 billion plan last April to eliminate polio by 2018, the organization received a mere \$1.83 billion in donations and a further \$3.13 billion in pledges and projections, leaving a shortfall of at least \$563 million (and likely much higher).



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