



Polio drive suspended across country after spike in attacks

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LAHORE: Amid serious security threats and increasing attacks on polio workers in different parts of the country, the federal government has suspended the anti-polio campaign “for an indefinite period”.

And for the first time in the history of Pakistan, the government has also suspended the post-campaign evaluation — Lot Quality Assurance Sampling (LQAS).

The National Emergency Operation Centre (EOC) for polio, Islamabad, issued a red alert to all the provinces on Friday, directing them to stop the anti-polio campaign all over the country to protect 270,000 polio field staff from attacks.

The nationwide campaign was launched in all districts of the country on April 22 and Friday was the last catch-up day.

Post-campaign evaluation has also been deferred as a large number of children were missed during the drive ending on Friday

“After the Peshawar incident, the uncertain and threatening situation for the frontline polio workers has emerged and we need to save the programme from a further major damage,” reads the alert issued by the EOC.

It says that it has been unanimously decided by the national technical team and Global Polio Eradication Initiative (SPEI) partners to call off the catch-up activities of April National Immunisation Day campaign across the country with immediate effect.

“Hence, no further vaccination or catch-up activity will be conducted in any area for this campaign,” said the EOC in the letter.

An official said that the World Health Organisation had been using the LQAS as new sampling methodology under the GPEI to document status of anti-polio coverage and areas of weak coverage with statistical reliability.

He said the national anti-polio programme had suffered a major setback due to frequent attacks on polio teams in different parts of the country, prompting the federal government to suspend LQAS activities as well.

He said the action was taken in the wake of the Peshawar incident in which a violent mob torched a government health facility and the murder of a woman polio worker in Chaman, besides attacks on staff in Sindh, Balochistan and Punjab in recent days.

The EOC in a separate official letter addressed to all the provinces conveyed apprehension about increasing attacks on polio workers, directing them to suspend LQAS activities.

The letter reads, "It has been decided by the National EOC that no post campaign evaluation (LQAS) will be conducted anywhere in the country."

The official said the EOC had acted due to fear of pathetic vaccination coverage of 40 million targeted children across the country because of security threats and attacks on polio workers.

In Punjab alone, he said, it was for the first time that 700,000 children were either missed or their families refused to get their children vaccinated, putting lives of too many children at risk of contracting the crippling disease, during the last four days of the drive which started on April 22.

The status of unvaccinated children in such a large number may create embarrassment for Pakistan as the Technical Advisory Group under the GPEI is scheduled to visit the country in coming weeks.

Polio tragedy

IT started with a rumour. As province-wide anti-polio efforts were under way in KP, around 75 students from a school in Badhber complained they had headaches, nausea and stomach aches after being administered polio drops. They were admitted in the Hayatabad Medical Complex, but were quickly discharged as doctors declared their condition stable. What had happened was likely a case of mass hysteria, given the fears that have been drilled in the population's mind about polio drops for years. A video of a man at the hospital claiming the vaccines were causing children to faint — and then, almost with comical effect, telling healthy children to 'fall asleep' for the cameras — began to do the rounds. It was clear what we were seeing was a hoax, the agenda of diseased mindsets. In another video, the same man claims some of the children have died. The man has now been arrested, but the damage is done. The fake news spread like wildfire. It is disheartening that one barefaced lie appears to have sent Pakistan's anti-polio efforts back, possibly by decades.

Outraged parents from school set a basic health unit on fire, smashing its windows and doors, while thousands of others filled KP's hospitals, panicking that their children would meet the same 'fate'. The events of a single day led to an 85pc rise in

vaccine refusals across the province: 700,000 families refused to administer drops to their children. (During last month's anti-polio drive, the number of refusals was 57,000.) In Peshawar, some 164,000 families refused have their children vaccinated. On TV channels, charlatan intellectuals spoke against vaccinations, endorsing ideas by conspiracy theorists that have long been refuted, while a popular daily's headline declared that hundreds of children fell sick after being administered polio drops in KP. No questions asked, no research undertaken, no evidence of critical engagement, the news was consumed and reproduced as fact.

And then the worst happened — it always does when disinformation campaigns and fear-mongering are given free rein. A police officer responsible for protecting polio teams was gunned down in Bannu, followed by the killing of another police officer in Buner the next day. The day after that, a young woman health worker was killed in the line of duty. While the rest of the world has vanquished the polio virus, Pakistan lives with the shame of being one of three countries that have been unable to eradicate it due to obscurantist beliefs and a culture of paranoia and conspiracy that is so ingrained. In this critical time, disinformation and lies that endanger the lives of so many cannot be tolerated. Authorities must remain vigilant of those who espouse anti-polio propaganda — be it through mosques or the media. And security should be beefed up for polio teams and their protectors instead of suspending the polio campaign, as the authorities have done.

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