**March 2014**

**No polio cases were reported in India for the past three years**

The World Health Organisation (WHO) South-East Asia Region, home to a quarter of the world’s population, was certified polio-free on Thursday by an independent commission under the WHO certification process.

This is the fourth of six WHO Regions to be certified, marking an important step towards global polio eradication. With this step, 80 per cent of the world’s population now lives in certified polio-free regions.

An independent panel of 11 experts in public health, epidemiology, virology, clinical medicine and related specialties constituting the South-East Asia Regional Certification Commission for Polio Eradication (SEA-RCCPE) met for two days to review evidence from countries before reaching the decision that all 11 countries of the Region, including India, are now polio-free and have met the requirements for certification.

To mark the occasion, the WHO presented official certification to India for its ‘Polio Free’ status. The Minister for Health and Family Welfare, Ghulam Nabi Azad, received the official certificate.

Speaking at the function, Mr. Azad expressed happiness at the historic public health achievement which seemed impossible with India having the highest burden of polio cases in the world.

Mr. Azad said India embarked on the programme to eradicate the nation of polio 19 years ago in 1995, when the disease used to cripple more than 50,000 children in the country every year. He said this achievement had been possible with resolute will at the highest levels, technological innovations like the indigenous bivalent polio vaccine, adequate domestic financial resources and close monitoring of polio programme, with which immunization levels soared to 99 per cent coverage and India achieved polio eradication. A 2.3-million strong team of polio volunteers and 150,000 supervisors worked day and night to reach every child.

“This is a momentous victory for the millions of health workers who have worked with governments, non-governmental organisations, civil society and international partners to eradicate polio from the Region. It is a sign of what we can bequeath our children when we work together,” said Dr. Poonam Khetrapal Singh, Regional Director for the WHO South-East Asia Region.

Certification of the Region comes as countries prepare for the introduction of inactivated polio vaccine (IPV) in routine immunization as part of the eventual phasing out of oral polio vaccines (OPV). More than 120 countries currently use only OPV. These countries will introduce a dose of IPV by the end of 2015 as part of their commitment to the global polio endgame plan which aims to ensure a polio-free world by 2018.

Excerpts from Report from <http://www.aljazeera.com/>

"While the country did face many challenges like our high population density, inaccessible terrains and widespread illiteracy and ignorance, the very nature of polio also ensured that the sustained campaigns against it succeeded," says Dr R Balasubramaniam, the founder of the Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement and Frank Rhodes Professor, Cornell University.

"While strong government and private partnerships played a huge role, ultimately this victory belongs to the strong network of field workers, community health specialists and volunteers who worked tirelessly to ensure that no part of the country was too inaccessible, no child too far away to vaccinate," Balasubramaniam explains.

In each National Pulse Polio Immunisation round, 2.4 million vaccinators under 150,000 supervisors visited over 200 million households to ensure that the nearly 172 million children, less than five years of age, were immunised with the Oral Polio Vaccine.

Mobile and transit vaccination teams immunised children at railway stations, at bus stands, market areas and construction sites areas.

While celebrating the achievement, Deepak Kapur, chairman of the Rotary International’s India National PolioPlus Committee, said "The term that India is polio-free is slightly misplaced. India has not had a reported case of polio over the last three years, but look at the case of China which had been polio-free for eight years before the virus crept in from Pakistan’s infected children. Pakistan and Afghanistan remain endemic and have re-infected countries like Syria, Angola and Somalia."

Overcoming the rejection of the vaccine by certain communities was perhaps the most important achievements of the campaign.Ashok Mahajan, a member of the Rotary Club of Mulund, Maharashtra, and partner in the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, knows this first hand. Appointed to India’s National PolioPlus Committee of Rotary International in 1997, Mahajan realised that unless minority communities were brought into the fold of the campaign, the fight against polio would never end.

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| http://www.aljazeera.com/mritems/Images/2014/1/17/2014117111324173734_3.jpg |
| **Cricket stars helped the campaign by participating in vaccination drives  [File: Getty Images]** |

"I was working in the Bhiwand area (in Mumbai city) where resistance among the Muslim community was very high," he says. "I knew if we were able to convince the imams of the mosques we would have little trouble vaccinating the children of the area." He persisted in trying to convince the imams of the Baba Makhdoom Shah Baba Dargah temple, and finally they agreed to talk to the people about the importance of immunisations after Friday prayers.

"They let us put up pro-vaccination posters around the mosque and this made a huge difference," he said. "Once we succeeded in Mumbai, we started work in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar."

"In one village a lady hid her children under the bed, refusing to let us vaccinate them. Her husband had threatened her with a divorce if she let us near them. I had to come back in the evening and talk to him for hours before he agreed."

Israeli-born photographer Sephi Bergerson has photographed the country’s polio eradication campaign since 2004, as part of assignments from WHO and UNICEF."Once I was assigned to photograph volunteers in an area beyond Kusheshwar Asthan Purbi, a little town in eastern Bihar state, along the banks of the Kosi River," he recounts. "At 3 am sharp they would collect the vaccines from the refrigerators and leave for the boats that would collect them at 5 am with very precise plans to reach every village along the Kosi river. Sometimes there was no electricity and people worked in candle light. Situations could get very rough with many pockets violently rejecting the idea of vaccination but never did I see the volunteers in despair."