

## Across borders

# Clerics offer help to fight polio in Pak

**NEW DELHI:** "India is not safe until neighbouring Pakistan is polio-free," said Ashok Mahajan, trustee of Rotary International PolioPlus Committee, highlighting the importance of eradicating polio in Pakistan.

Buoyed by their results in dispelling the myths surrounding polio vaccination in UP, members of India's Rotary Muslim Ulema committee have now come forward to offer their assistance in Pakistan.

### To dispel myths

"The members have offered to extend their services or even visit Pakistan and share their reasoning to dispel myths and rumours against polio vaccination," said Deepak Kapur, chairman of Rotary International's India National Pulse-Plus Committee.

According to people working towards eradication of polio, rumours have played their part in preventing complete eradication in Pakistan.

"Rumours that circulate include that the ingredients of polio vaccination are unacceptable in Islam, and that it is a conspiracy by the US to eliminate the community," said Mahajan.

Over the last few years, the Ulema committee in UP has been successful in breaking the resistance against the polio vaccine.

According to Mahajan, religious leaders administered polio drops to their own children in front of cameras, which helped in acceptance of the polio drops in the community.

"The religious leaders believe they could repeat the magic in Pakistan. Their ad-

vice is often accepted in the community, and we are banking on that," Mahajan said.

Whether the Ulemas will be successful will depend on Pakistan's willingness to accept the proposal.

### Taking cues

But members of Pakistan's Rotary have already taken various cues from India's immunization campaigns, both technical and social.

"Our team of Rotarians and officials have visited parts of UP and Bihar to understand certain common indicators that will help us enhance our outreach strategy, and address loopholes," said Aziz Menon, chairman of Rotary in Pakistan.

"The approach followed in the minority communities of UP is fantastic and has worked wonders there," he added.

Concerns about importing the endemic disease across the subcontinent have been raised following fresh outbreaks of polio in Nigeria and its transportation to Kenya and Somalia.

Right after India reported the last case of polio in January 2011, five vaccination posts were established along the Indo-Pak border.

"This year, two posts have been established at Indo-Bangladesh and Indo-Bhutan borders each," said Dr Sunil Bahl of National Polio Surveillance Project India, World Health Organisation, at a meet of Rotarians.

While India has not reported a single case of polio since January 2011, Pakistan has seen 10 cases this year alone. Globally, the figure stands at 19 this year.

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