

Editorial

Polio Eradication from Pakistan

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Editor

Despite all efforts, Pakistan is still among a handful of countries affected by poliovirus. The areas worst hit by both polio and terrorism are Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, located along the border with Afghanistan. Afghanistan is the only other country in the region that, like Pakistan, has failed to eradicate polio. There was a time when the poliovirus would somehow reach the border areas of Pakistan due to the evacuation of refugees.

A disease that was this close to being completely wiped out from the country has made a tragic return – simply because of the conspiracy theories surrounding a most basic, yet completely necessary vaccination. Pakistan had been able to keep the polio virus under better control over the past two years. 147 cases in 2019 and 87 cases reported in 2020 while only one case in 2021. This year, though, has reported twenty cases of the virus in which 17 from North Waziristan, 02 from Laki Marwat and 01 from South Waziristan, districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Polio spreads very quickly and as the number of unvaccinated children increases, the virus cannot be contained.

The International Monitoring Board (IMB) of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) has noted that the country has a great deal to do to ensure it wins its ongoing battle against polio, which has been disrupted due to overlooked children, children who have been missed altogether, refusals by parents to have children vaccinated and social media campaigns which suggest that the vaccine is somehow dangerous or injurious.

A polio eradication campaign has been going on in Pakistan for a long time. At one point malicious rumours were circulated to hinder universal vaccination. The gullible population was told that vaccination was an effort by the West to reduce the global Muslim population. Many bought into the propaganda. Some people found it hard to believe that the West could be spending billions of dollars for the welfare of people at war with it. Others questioned the government's priorities and motivation. Religious leaders were then enlisted in support of the campaign and the problem has eased.

There was a general perception in the Tribal Areas that polio workers were spying for the West.

The government and some human rights groups tried to allay the fears but the damage had already been done.

Following the revelation, the polio campaign across the country, including in Waziristan, was presented as an anti-Islam conspiracy. Pamphlets were distributed against polio eradication campaigns and warnings were issued to the government to end these campaigns.

Fifteen months later, with the return of polio cases in 2022, Pakistan is facing yet another challenge. An unstable Afghanistan in the neighborhood is struggling with terrorism as well as polio virus.

There are four major reasons for this. First, some of the extremist organisations have declared polio workers their enemy. The second reason is our social structure. The third reason is the scourge of corruption. The fourth reason is ineffective communication by the government and health authorities.

The fourth reason for low polio vaccination coverage is miscommunication. It will be fair to say that we have not been able to tell our people that the world is worried about our polio cases because their own gains are threatened by our failure. Already, several countries require polio vaccination certificates before allowing Pakistanis entry.

Poverty and ignorance continue to hold our collective consciousness to ransom. Logic and reason are not the determinants of our discussion and decisions. Numerous polio workers in Peshawar have reported that fake videos of children suffering harm after polio vaccination.

Chronic refusals are also common. Many parents deny their children polio vaccines by hiding them.

Corruption is another major factor. Polio workers who carry out vaccination campaigns are paid around Rs.1,000 per day. These are the people we depend on for deliverables.

Pakistan remains one of the only two countries in the world still endemic to polio. The fight against polio is dependent on a consistent approach by governments and no change in policies that have been worked out successfully over a period of years.

In this final push to eradicate polio, we may need to vaccinate fewer people than before but the ones left are those who may be most difficult to find and persuade. Yet just about every other country in the world has managed – and there is no justification for us being left behind.