



## Joint Press Release Ministry of Health, WHO and UNICEF

### **Iraq Celebrates its first National Vaccination Week with renewed commitment to reach each and every child and mother with the vital vaccine**

Baghdad, 24 April 2010---Iraq will launch its first National Vaccination Week (NVW), beginning 24 through 30 April, focusing on vaccination as an investment for a better life and on the responsibility and crucial role of the family and community in providing protection against diseases.

The objective of the NVW is to improve communication and dissemination of information on the value of immunization, increase community demand for immunization and use a combination of innovative approaches and solutions to improve access to immunization in Iraq.

"Vaccines have the power not only to save, but also to transform lives, giving children a chance to grow up healthy, go to school, and improve their life prospects", said Dr Saleh Al Hasnawi, Iraq's Health Minister. "Building public understanding of the benefits of immunization and appreciation of its value is our main objective", Dr Al-Hasnawi added.

During the NVW, Departments of Health at all 18 Iraqi governorates will be joined by hundreds of communities to carry out a variety of awareness and health education activities, especially in low coverage areas. Those activities were designed to remind parents, caregivers and health care providers of the benefits and importance of routine childhood vaccination. They will include media events, workshops, training sessions, social mobilization initiatives, round table discussions and exhibitions addressing a wide range of vaccine-related issues.

WHO and UNICEF take the chance of the NVW to commend the courage and unflagging determination of Iraq's health authorities and staff, parents and communities to make immunization in the country a successful undertaking despite the immense challenges Iraq faced during the last three decades.

"It is high time for Iraq to introduce new vaccines into its national immunization programme. The involvement of community and parents' commitment to complete the routine immunization schedule through the services available at health centers are crucial factors for the continuity of the programme, especially in low coverage areas", said Dr Hassan El-Bushra, WHO Representative in Iraq

"Child survival lies at the heart of everything we do. Every effort should be made now to administer the new vaccines to all children across Iraq, especially those living in low

coverage areas. This will not only contribute to achieving the universal 100 per cent coverage in vaccines, but also to cutting child mortality from 41 to 21 in every 1,000 dying before the age five by the year 2015", said Sikander Khan, UNICEF Representative in Iraq. "Only then can we realize the development goal of reducing child mortality in Iraq by half", he added.

Keeping Iraq free of vaccine-preventable diseases is testament to Iraq's commitment to ensure every child and mother's right to health. Maintaining a polio-free status since 2000, the improvement of immunization rates with four in five children receiving all recommended vaccinations by the age of 12 months, the steady coverage of infant measles vaccination which jumped from 70% in 2007 to 88% in 2008 and to above 90% in 2009, the eradication of smallpox in 1978, and utilizing national immunization programme as a platform to provide other life-saving health interventions such as vitamin A supplements, are milestones in Iraq's national immunization efforts.

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