

One million vaccines airlifted into Iraq to curb measles outbreak

Baghdad, 16 May, 2009. Today, one million doses of measles vaccines arrived by plane into Baghdad. The vaccines will be used by the Ministry of Health, WHO, and UNICEF in an emergency vaccination campaign to prevent the spread of a major measles outbreak in the country.

“These vaccines have arrived at a critical time as the already severe outbreak is starting to gain ground in the remaining unaffected areas of the country” noted Sikander Khan, UNICEF Iraq Representative. “With the vaccines hundreds of thousands of children’s lives will be protected from the disease thus contributing to Iraq’s efforts to achieve the millennium development goal of reducing child mortality by two thirds by 2015.”

Starting on May 24th and lasting two weeks the vaccines will be provided by two thousand health workers and voluntary vaccinators in the Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, and Dahuk governorates. The health workers and vaccinators, in spite of security risks, will hand-carry the vaccines from house-to-house to vaccinate around 835,000 under-five children.

The current number of cases in Iraq is nearly three times more than in all of 2008. Since the beginning of the year, over 22,000 children have been infected with around 1,000 cases continuing to be recorded every week. At the end of March ninety-three children had perished. The rise is due to the increasing low immunity of the population that has resulted from reduced coverage of routine vaccinations from 2005-2008 due to insecurity.

“These vaccines procured with funds from the UN Central Emergency Response Fund are essential to mitigating the effects of the outbreak on Iraqi children” stated Dr. Naeema Al-Gasseer, Representative of the World Health Organization (WHO) in Iraq. “Measles is a highly infectious childhood disease that in addition to being fatal can lead to permanent brain damage, blindness and immune system deficiencies as well as worsen other common childhood illnesses such as diarrhea and pneumonia.”

The Ministry of Health, with WHO and UNICEF support, is currently completing an emergency campaign in the Najaf governorate to prevent the outbreak from spreading there and continues its efforts in all other governorates to limit the disease’s further propagation.

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