

PRESS RELEASE

Ministry of Health launches a nation-wide Integrated Immunization Campaign for Measles, Polio and Vitamin A Supplementation

Juba, South Sudan, 23 April 2014 – More than 2.4 million children will be vaccinated in a nation-wide measles, polio and Vitamin A campaign, launched today by the Ministry of Health with support from the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF. The integrated Immunization Campaign for Measles, Polio and Vitamin A supplementation in South Sudan aims to reduce the incidence of measles to less than five cases per million and to boost the population’s immunity against Polio. South Sudan has been polio free since June 2009 – almost five years.

The immunization campaign, the first phase of which will be conducted from 23 to 30 April 2014, just before African Vaccination Week/World Immunization Week, is targeting more than 2.1 million children under the age of five with measles vaccine and vitamin A supplementation and more than 2.4 million with polio vaccine. Polio vaccines are given to children from birth, while measles vaccines are given only to children from six months old. This accounts for the different numbers of children for the two vaccines.

The first phase of the immunization campaign begins today with 4,000 vaccination teams covering seven out of ten states that are most accessible. The teams will be organised into fixed, temporary, mobile and outreach vaccination posts in all communities. The Ministry of Health is exploring how best to conduct the vaccination campaign in Upper Nile, Unity and Jonglei States, which will make up the second round of the campaign. All children displaced to camps in the first seven States will be covered in the first round.

“This year, with only 32 per cent of children in South Sudan having completed the immunization schedule, this campaign gives parents and caregivers an opportunity to ensure that all children under the age of five are vaccinated against these killer diseases. I urge all parents and caregivers to take their children to the nearest health facility or vaccination post during this campaign in order to protect their children from these deadly diseases,” said the Minister of Health, the Honorable Dr. Riek Gai Kok.

Children in the world’s youngest nation are still not being reached with vital vaccines. Reasons for the low vaccination coverage rate include geographical exclusion, lack of resources, weak infrastructure and conflicts that prevent health workers from providing services to affected communities. Routine immunization, so critical for protecting children, remains significantly under-funded.

With the on-going crisis in the country, children have become even more susceptible to vaccine preventable diseases such as measles and sporadic measles outbreaks have been reported across the country, especially among internally displaced persons and their host communities. The situation is likely to worsen with the coming rainy season, which will cause flooding and cut off many areas from receiving urgently needed medical assistance.

“We urge parents and caregivers not to overlook the importance of protecting children from silent killers such as measles, a disease that can spread very quickly,” said Jonathan Veitch, UNICEF Representative in South Sudan. “We have already seen the enormous preventive power of measles vaccines – in the camps for displaced

persons where children have already been vaccinated, the number of children reported to have died of measles has been brought down to zero this week,” he added.

Measles control remains a major challenge in South Sudan, with outbreaks affecting children in all ten states over the past two years. In 2013, a total of 22 counties in nine States had reported outbreaks of measles with a total of over 600 cases recorded. Most measles cases have occurred in children whose vaccination status could either not be verified or who were not vaccinated. This reflects the large gap that exists in routine immunization, which means large numbers of people are at risk. Children are the most vulnerable.

“The violence that broke out late last year affected measles campaigns originally planned for February of this year. The situation is even worse now and we must reach as many children as possible before the rainy season intensifies. The Measles & Rubella Initiative, the Global Polio Eradication Initiative have therefore provided over US\$5.4 million and also stationed staff in all states to provide direct technical and managerial support to the State Ministries of Health to ensure quality in this campaign. The amount is going into procurement of vaccines and campaign materials, training, transportation, social mobilisation and communication, and incentive for volunteers for the campaign,” said WHO Representative Dr. Abdi Mohamed.

Funding for this response was made available by the Measles & Rubella Initiative and the Global Polio Eradication Initiative with support from UNICEF and WHO. Other partners are USAID, American Red Cross, Rotary International, DFID/HPF, World Bank/IMA, GoJ/JICA and national and international non-governmental organizations.

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