

## Media centre

# WHO delivers medicines as diphtheria spreads in Yemen

News release

27 NOVEMBER 2017 | SANA'A - WHO has delivered medicines to tackle an outbreak of diphtheria in Yemen, warning that sustained humanitarian access is critical to stopping its spread.

The shipment of 1,000 vials of life-saving anti-toxins and 17 tonnes of medical supplies arrived in Sanaa on Monday (November 27) after being stalled by the three-week closure of sea and air ports.

"It is shocking that in 2017, there are children dying of an ancient disease that is vaccine-preventable and can be easily treated," said Dr Nevio Zagaria, WHO Country Representative in Yemen.

The anti-toxins can help stop the spread of the bacterium to vital organs in patients already infected with diphtheria. But no supplies were available in Yemen before the arrival of the WHO shipment on Monday.

Antibiotics and vaccines are also critical to treating and preventing the highly infectious respiratory disease – both of which are in short supply in Yemen.

"In recent days, children and adults have died while the medicines needed to save their lives were available only a few hours away. We need unconditional and sustained access to all areas of Yemen to stop these unconscionable deaths from malnutrition, cholera, and now diphtheria," Zagaria added.

Diphtheria is making an alarming comeback in the war torn country, with 189 clinically diagnosed cases and 20 deaths – mostly children and young adults – in the last three months.

Most diphtheria cases and deaths have been reported in Ibb governorate but the outbreak is spreading fast, already affecting 13 governorates. The closest points of entry to Ibb are in Sana'a and Hodeida, making it crucial that Sana'a airport and the port of Hodeida remain open.

Despite the conflict and recent closures, WHO, UNICEF, and partners have continued to work with available supplies, vaccinating 8,500 children under five years in al-Sadah and Yarim districts in Ibb governorate during November.

A vaccination campaign targeting 300,000 children younger than 12 months began on Saturday (November 25). Further vaccination rounds for more than 3 million children and young adults in priority districts are due in December.

Left unchecked, diphtheria can cause devastating epidemics, mainly affecting children.

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