

- Somali religious leaders join the fight against polio

Contributed by Author
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NAIROBI, 18 July 2007 – The Puntland Minister of Justice and Religious Affairs, Abdirizak Yasin Abdulle, led 40 religious leaders from North East Somalia in a joint declaration of support for polio prevention and immunization today.

"We have a big responsibility," said Minister Abdulle. "It is now time for the Sheikhs to take in front of Allah their responsibilities for the eradication of polio. We must call for the vaccination of all children under five years of age and work for the benefit of the children."

The declaration could be a major breakthrough for the polio programme in Somalia, which has faced resistance from some parents who have cited religious beliefs as a reason to refuse immunization for their children.

Polio re-emerged in Somalia in July 2005, after almost three polio-free years, with 185 cases confirmed in 2005, 36 in 2006 and eight in 2007.

Announcing the declaration on behalf of the religious leaders, Somaliland Minister of Religious Affairs, Mahamoud Sheikh Sufi Mohamed said, "Islamic Scholars are required to effectively support community awareness about polio eradication and immunization in general. Knowing the facts and proving things is what Islam calls for on any issue. It refuses to follow untrue things and rumours that are not based on knowledge."

The official support from the group of influential Sheikhs followed their participation in a two-day workshop in Garowe. During the workshop they met with Dr. Ahmed Ragaa A. Ragab, a well-known Islamic scholar at Al Azhar University and medical doctor, who dispelled rumours, myths and misconceptions about polio immunization and the polio vaccine.

The Garowe workshop held on 2 - 3 July followed a similar event in Burao, Somaliland (North West Somalia), on 27 - 28 June. The Puntland and Somaliland workshops were hosted by their respective Ministries of Religious Affairs and Health with the support of UNICEF and in collaboration with the World Health Organization.

Explaining the success of the workshops, UNICEF expert Anne Daher Aden said, "We approached religious leaders of Somalia with tremendous respect for their views, with the clear understanding that all questions and concerns were to be raised and answered and we eventually succeeded in building trust in immunization among participants."

The workshops addressed and clarified both religious and scientific issues. With references to the Qur'an and the Haddiths, Dr. Ragab showed that immunization as a preventive mechanism is halal (lawful) and necessary in Islam. He quoted religious verses to demonstrate that communities and parents have a responsibility towards the health of their children; to support the prevention of disease through immunization; to condemn the spreading of rumours against the well-being of children and to stress the responsibility of religious leaders in their communities in support of immunization.

Participants also learned about the role of the UN in polio prevention, modes of polio transmission and its effects, the safety and dosage of the oral polio vaccine (OPV), vaccine storage, campaigns and disease surveillance and saw demonstrations of the cold chain and injection safety. In Garowe (Puntland), the personal testimony of a young man with lower limb paralysis caused by polio presented a powerful message about the disabling effects of the disease.

By the end of the workshops, the religious leaders had not only pledged their support but had identified the role they would play in mobilizing their communities to immunize children. They agreed to share with their peers at district level the key messages and agreements reached in support of child health and to broadcast immunization messages from their mosques during future polio campaigns.

"We agree with the conclusions of the doctors. Rumors were wrong. Religious leaders must create awareness in all Mosques and among the community," said Sheikh Haji Ali Ahmed from Puntland.

The next polio campaign will take place across Somalia and Somaliland at the end of July 2007 and in the last week of August. Sub-national campaigns will be conducted during the rest of the year if necessary, as polio cases occur.

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