

Polio in South Sudan: the outbreak that never was

On September 30th 2013, the Government of South Sudan announced an outbreak of polio in the country. This was declared a national health emergency, since the country had been polio free since 2009.

According to the press release, “two girls, aged two and eight, living in Aweil South county, Northern Bahr el Ghazal State and a two year-old girl in Ikotos county, Eastern Equatoria State, were confirmed on September 26 as having polio. The status of the three girls is being followed closely. The cases were confirmed by the Kenya Medical Research Institute in Nairobi”.

The Honourable Dr. Riek Gai, Minister of Health, said we are “mobilizing from the highest level of Government to every community in the country in order to stop this disease” and are also “working closely with WHO, UNICEF, and other key partners around the world and here in South Sudan to ensure the most effective response. Together, we will stop the spread of polio in South Sudan”.

This outbreak in South Sudan was attributed to the confirmed cases in Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia earlier this year. Fearing an outbreak in the country, the Ministry embarked on polio vaccination campaigns in the states considered at high risk: Jonglei, Upper Nile, Eastern and Central Equatoria and Pariang county in Unity State.

Despite these campaigns, the virus managed to slip into the country. The government established a task force with the goal of “implementing the outbreak response plan to interrupt transmission

by rapidly increasing population immunity and minimizing the risk of further spread to the rest of the country and neighbouring countries” and “to ensure that the response is adequate to interrupt polio transmission within six months of detection of the first case, as per the World Health Assembly established standards”.

The Supplementary Immunization Activities (SIAs) designed to curb the spread of the wild poliovirus are as follows:

1. Mop-up Response: 24 Sept. to 4th Oct. 2013
2. Supplementary National Immunization Days (SNIDS): 22 – 28 Oct. 2013
3. Three consecutive NIDS:
 - a. 05 – 12 November 2013
 - b. 19 – 26 November 2013
 - c. 10 – 17 December 2013

Fortunately, it later emerged that there is no polio. The South Sudan sample was contaminated by samples from Somalia. The tests done at CDC were negative.

The SSMJ team commends the Government of the Republic of South Sudan, the Ministry of Health and all its partners in health for the quick response and mobilization to stop the spread of the virus and commitment to eradicate polio. The exercise has shown the readiness of all stake holders in working together to kick polio out of South Sudan.

Editor-in-Chief

