

UNHCR teams working to fight the expansion of polio in Syria

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The UN refugee agency (UNHCR) is working to help address polio vaccination needs inside Syria's hard-to-reach zones in close coordination with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent as the two relief agencies have joined with other agencies to participate in the national polio vaccination campaign that began recently following reports of several polio cases.

UNHCR and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) are working together to support the vaccination campaign in areas that are usually hard to reach in Rural Damascus, Rural Homs, Deir Ezzor and Raqqa.

Reports that thirteen children have contracted polio have been confirmed recently. Syria eradicated polio 14 years ago but vaccination efforts have suffered during the last three years of conflict.

At a public health centre in Al Hassakeh in eastern Syria, where 23 UNHCR-supported health volunteers are providing awareness sessions on issues relating to polio and other health-related issues, in one month the number of children attending the centre rose from 46 to 1,357. The UNHCR volunteers are also vaccinating children.

So far, throughout Al Hassakeh province, 87,728 children have been vaccinated including 7,676 children who were vaccinated by the UNHCR-supported volunteers. Next week UNHCR's volunteers will join mobile teams to access children in remote areas.

"It is clear whilst the work has started, much more remains to be done," said UNHCR Representative in Damascus Tarik Kurdi. "UNHCR is pleased to work closely with its health partners to ensure that vulnerable children and other persons in hard-to-reach zones in Rural Damascus, in Rural Homs, in Deir Ezzor and Raqqa get access to the vaccinations they require."

The total target group of children expected to be vaccinated throughout Al Hassakeh province is 241,203 children according to Ministry of Health statistics. The World Health Organization is planning six to eight rounds of oral polio vaccinations in Syria. UNICEF has procured 1.35 billion doses of oral polio vaccine and by the end of this year expects to have 1.7 billion doses for use in its worldwide vaccination programmes including in the Middle East region.

Preparation to reach the target population of youngsters under the age of five years-old are currently underway, including the training of volunteers, efforts to secure the cold chain and other logistical efforts. It is hoped that the polio vaccinations in Rural Damascus, Deir Ezzor and Raqqa will start in a week's time, while SARC has already started the vaccinations in Rural Homs.

Meanwhile, UNHCR continues to participate in the awareness campaign highlighting issues surrounding polio and measles. Awareness campaigns are a proven means to reaching vulnerable young Syrian children who may have missed vital vaccinations.

Special outreach programming at UNHCR's cash distribution centre in Damascus has reached some 5,000 persons in Damascus (800 displaced families). As UNHCR's monthly cash distribution commenced this week in Lattakia it is expected that more than 36,000 vulnerable persons (6,000 families) will be reached in that community with messages about the need to ensure the vaccination of children.

Thousands of displaced persons and other needy groups approach UNHCR for cash assistance each month so the distribution centres are ideal locations to inform conflict-affected persons about the UN's vaccination campaign. The UNHCR also provides core relief items like cooking supplies, tents, plastic tarpaulin, blankets and hygienic items that so far this year have reached more than 2.7 million people in all of Syria's 14 governorates.

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