Beat: Health

WHO confirms 10 polio cases in northeast Syria, warns of spreading

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USPA News - At least ten children in northeast Syria have been infected with polio, making it the country`s first outbreak in more than a decade and posing the risk of further spread across the region as a whole, the World Health Organization (WHO) said on Tuesday. The agency issued a regional surveillance alert earlier this month after receiving reports of a cluster of acute flaccid paralysis (AFP), a polio outcome that affects approximately 1 percent of all polio victims.

The 22 cases were detected in Deir ez-Zor province, and laboratory tests have now confirmed wild poliovirus type 1 (WPV1) in at least 10 of them. The WHO said most of the victims are below the age of two and were either not immunized or under-immunized. Polio mainly affects children under 5 years of age, and there is no treatment available to stop the progression of the disease or reverse the bodily damage. Vaccination is the only means to prevent it. "Final genetic sequencing results are pending to determine the origin of the isolated viruses," the international health organization said in a statement, adding that wild poliovirus had not been detected in Syria since 1999. It said estimated immunization rates in Syria have declined from 91 percent in 2010 to 68 percent in 2012. The laboratory confirmation of the poliovirus was made by the regional reference laboratory of WHO`s Eastern Mediterranean Region, but an initial test from the national polio laboratory in the Syrian capital of Damascus had previously indicated the victims were likely suffering from polio. As such, health authorities treated the cases as an actual polio outbreak pending final laboratory confirmation. A large-scale supplementary immunization activity (SIA) that had already been planned and aims to vaccinate 1.6 million children against polio, measles, mumps and rubella was launched in Syria last week. Implementation of a similar campaign commenced in Deir ez-Zor province when the first cases were reported earlier this month. Considering AFP typically affects only around 1 percent of all polio victims, health authorities are now planning a larger-scale outbreak response across Syria and neighboring countries. This campaign is expected to begin early next month and will likely last at least 6 to 8 months, depending on the situation in Syria and the spread of the virus. "Given the current situation in the Syrian Arab Republic, frequent population movements across the region and subnational immunity gaps in key areas, the risk of further international spread of wild poliovirus type 1 across the region is considered to be high," the WHO warned. It said all travelers to and from polio-infected areas should be fully vaccinated against the highly contagious and crippling disease, which is transmitted via contaminated food and water.

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