



Despite tragic setbacks, push to end polio remains strong

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In September 2012, the end of polio seemed close at hand. Hope was palpable at United Nations headquarters, where an amazing array of world luminaries extolled efforts to eradicate the highly infectious, crippling disease.

Incidence had fallen more than 99 percent since 1988, saving 8 million people from paralysis, thanks to an international partnership known as the [Global Polio Eradication Initiative \(GPEI\)](#). A polio-free world was almost in sight; only three countries—Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Pakistan—remained endemic. Their respective leaders, Afghan President Hamid Karzai, Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan, and Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, all expressed determination to fight the scourge.

"I'm very focused on the impact per dollar," Bill Gates of the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#), which provides key support to GPEI, told the packed hall. "This is one of the smartest allocations of resources the world can make."

Three months later, the optimistic energy of that historic meeting was deflated by heartfelt grief and serious concern when nine polio vaccination workers were brutally murdered in Pakistan. These tragic deaths were soon followed by 10 more.

Now the carnage has spread beyond Pakistan into Nigeria. Nine polio immunizers were recently killed, as well as three other health workers.

While circumstances vary in each country, and it's not clear every death was related to the polio campaign, trends are discernable. Medical workers, particularly vaccinators, are targets.

"Building trust is key to public acceptance of vaccines," Dr. Heidi Larson, an anthropologist at the [London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine](#), tells [MediaGlobal](#). "In India, for example, parents sometimes felt uncomfortable when men administered vaccines to their children. Once women were assigned as vaccinators in the polio program, acceptance of the oral polio vaccine increased."

But in Pakistan and Nigeria, fears have morphed into suspicions, provoked by politics. An important instigating factor: in June 2011, [The Guardian](#), a British newspaper, revealed that the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had devised a false vaccination campaign to obtain DNA from Osama bin Laden's family—an effort to confirm his whereabouts prior to his killing.

Western vaccination workers have been suspected as spies ever since. Rumors, always prevalent, now abound; vaccines are thought to contain HIV, or cause sterilization.

Dr. Larson describes circumstances in Pakistan where "cultural concerns have been further aggravated by political tensions and extremism." She provides an example: "On the one hand, woman health workers are more culturally accepted coming into a home to vaccinate children, on the other hand...some Taliban militants are against girls and women working outside the home." Of note, a majority of vaccinators killed have been women.

In June 2012, the Taliban prevented vaccinations for 161,000 Pakistani children, demanding the United States stop drone strikes first. Today, armed conflict keeps health workers from reaching vulnerable boys and girls in many areas.

How can Pakistan and Nigeria, not to mention the entire global eradication initiative, recover from recent attacks and press forward? Although vaccinations may be temporarily suspended in areas where killings occur, both countries have enhanced security for medical workers. Pakistan has pledged to [deploy 250,000](#) by year-end. These men and women display enormous courage, knowing they risk death as they move from child to child with their inoculations. (Policemen themselves are not immune from danger; one officer in Pakistan [was recently shot and killed](#) while protecting a UN-backed polio drive.)

Because of these heroic efforts, victory is still within reach. Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Pakistan remain dedicated to eradicating the disease. GPEI, with help from The Gates Foundation and in partnership with the World Health Organization (WHO), Rotary International, the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and UNICEF, has poured billions of dollars into the battle.

WHO's Sona Bari, officer for External Relations/Global Polio Eradication Initiative, describes the complex conditions facing health advocates in Pakistan, "Without in any way underestimating the security challenges in parts of the country, our data shows that the main reasons we have not yet eradicated polio in Pakistan remain operational and managerial in nature."



Pakistani child receives polio vaccine. Photo credit: Global Polio Eradication Initiative

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The [Pakistan National Emergency Action Plan](#) for polio eradication strives to correct these deficiencies by improving vaccinator training and capacity, as well as accountability by local administrators. Education is also vitally important; mass media campaigns have been devised to increase national awareness. (An [action plan has also been developed for Nigeria](#), focusing on its unique needs.)

Bari says, "We are grateful for the engagement of local leaders, and to the governments of Pakistan and Nigeria, in their on-going efforts to try to create an environment where children can be safely reached with essential interventions by frontline health workers."

Curbing the spread of polio is essential not only for the people of Pakistan and Nigeria but also for their neighbors. Egypt, polio-free since 2004, recently identified the poliovirus in sewage samples, an alarming turn of events that [WHO linked to Pakistan](#). Permanent vaccination centers have therefore been established at Pakistani airports.

Preventing paralysis among hundreds of thousands worldwide benefits more than the polio eradication initiative. Systems established for polio inoculations can also be used for other vaccine-preventable diseases, setting the stage for a variety of ambitious public health campaigns.

The Gates Foundation honors health workers, including those slain, telling **MediaGlobal**, "Every day vaccinators...work under challenging and dangerous circumstances to ensure all children do not suffer from deadly and vaccine-preventable diseases. There is no greater act than ensuring all children have a chance at living a healthy productive life. These vaccinators were providing that chance."

Ending polio is both a noble goal and an achievable one. Its eradication would be a historic milestone, with vast humanitarian and economic benefits. While obstacles remain intensely challenging, courage and determination have not waned. Vaccinators continue bravely on the frontlines, children's welfare ever present in their minds.

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