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World leaders stress ‘once-in-a-generation’ chance to end polio

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Bill Gates speaks about efforts to eradicate polio at a high-level meeting at the UN Headquarters on September 27, 2012. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has spent over \$1 billion on polio vaccination efforts worldwide. "I'm very focused on the impact per dollar," Gates said. "This is one of the smartest allocations of resources the world can make." Photo credit: Matt Richter

[Polio](#), a contagious virus that can lead to paralysis and even death, may seem like a disease of the distant past to those of us living in the United States and other developed countries. But polio is still a serious threat in Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Pakistan.

Its complete elimination was the focus of a high-level meeting held 27 September 2012 at United Nations (UN) headquarters. The stage was filled with global luminaries determined to seize a “once-in-a-generation” opportunity to end polio forever.

“This extraordinary gathering shows our collective will to eradicate polio,” said UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. He went on to tell the packed conference hall, “This is a matter of health and justice.”

Although a vaccine to prevent polio has been available for 60 years, the fight to end the disease worldwide gathered major steam in 1988 with the launch of the [Global Polio Eradication Initiative \(GPEI\)](#), a partnership

between national governments, the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#), Rotary International, the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and UNICEF. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has been a key supporter.

GPEI's work has been extremely successful; since its launch, the incidence of polio has declined more than 99 percent. Advantages, both humanitarian and economic, are significant. It is estimated more than eight million people have been saved from paralysis. An additional 1.5 million childhood deaths have been prevented through associated public health activities. While donors have contributed \$9 billion to the effort since 1988, financial benefits will amount to more than \$50 billion over the next 20 years, mostly in low-income countries.

GPEI is currently developing a Polio Eradication Endgame and Legacy Strategy 2014-2018. Funding for this initiative is key; its success will produce more than a world free of polio, since its infrastructure will also be used for other vaccine-preventable diseases.

At the meeting, Afghan President Hamid Karzai, Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan, and Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari all vowed to stop the spread of polio in their countries. Emergency plans are now in place.

Unfortunately, those who remain at risk—particularly children, pregnant women and the elderly—are difficult to reach. UNICEF Executive Director Dr. Anthony Lake [spoke passionately](#) about these challenges and the courage displayed by public health workers, “heroes in the field who risk their lives, every day, to deliver vaccines to children in some of the most dangerous parts of the world.”

Speaking on behalf of [The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#), Bill Gates said, “The evidence is clear. If we all do our part, we can and will end this disease. But we must act quickly and give ourselves the very best chance to succeed. When we defeat polio, it will motivate us to aim for other great health and development milestones.”

WHO Director-General Dr. Margaret Chan also spoke with force and conviction, telling attendees, “Failure to eradicate polio is unforgivable, forever. Failure is not an option. No single one of us can bring this long, hard drive over the last hurdle. But together we can.”

As Chan told UNEARTH News, “Reaching every child in just parts of three countries is all that stands between us and a polio-free world.” The risks of ignoring this unique opportunity are high and tragic but fortunately, as Ban Ki-moon indicated, collective will seems strong.

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