

Polio, an international public health emergency

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'Polio, an international public health emergency'



In a first, the World Health Organisation has declared polio as an international public health emergency. It has said that polio could grow in the next few months and has described the current polio outbreaks across at least ten countries in Asia, Africa and the Middle East as an "extraordinary event" that required a coordinated international response.

WHO pointed out that Pakistan, Syria and Cameroon have allowed the virus to spread beyond their borders, and recommended that those three governments require citizens to obtain a certificate proving they have been vaccinated for polio before traveling abroad.

"Until it is eradicated, polio will continue to spread internationally, find and paralyze susceptible kids," Dr Bruce Aylward, who leads WHO's polio efforts said in a press conference.

The WHO has never before issued an international alert on polio, a disease that usually strikes children under five and is most often spread through infected water. There is no specific cure, but several vaccines exist.

Many experts have said that fear is looming large because polio is re-emerging in countries previously free of the disease, such as Syria, Somalia and Iraq, where civil war or unrest now complicates efforts to contain the virus. Further, they said that this is happening during the traditionally low season for the spread of polio. Experts have also expressed concern about polio cases increasing as the weather becomes warmer and wetter in the coming months across the northern hemisphere.

The vast majority of new cases are in Pakistan, where the WHO has set up an independent monitoring board.

At the end of last month, there were 68 confirmed polio cases worldwide, compared with just 24 at the same time last year. In

2013, polio reappeared in Syria, sparking fears the civil war there could ignite a wider outbreak as refugees flee to other countries across the region. The virus has also been identified in the sewage system in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, although no cases have been spotted.

In February, the WHO found that polio had also returned to Iraq, where it spread from neighboring Syria. It is also circulating in Afghanistan (where it spread from Pakistan) and Equatorial Guinea (from neighboring Cameroon) as well as Nigeria, Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya. Officials also worry countries torn by conflict, such as Ukraine, Sudan and the Central African Republic, are rife for polio reinfection.