

Polio vaccination campaign to resume in northern Gaza

Joint statement by WHO and UNICEF

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Children are receiving polio vaccines at health clinic at a health clinic in Khan Younis, southern Gaza Strip.

EAST JERUSALEM/AMMAN/GENEVA/NEW YORK, 1 November 2024 - "A third phase of the polio vaccination campaign is set to begin tomorrow in part of the northern Gaza Strip after being postponed from 23 October 2024 due to lack of access and assured, comprehensive humanitarian pauses, intense bombardment, and mass evacuation orders. These conditions made it impossible for families to safely bring their children for vaccination and for vaccination teams to perform their duties.

"The humanitarian pause necessary to conduct the campaign has been assured, however, the area of the pause has been substantially reduced compared to the first round of vaccination in northern Gaza, conducted in September 2024. It is now limited to just Gaza City. Though in the past few weeks, at least 100,000 people have been forced to evacuate from North Gaza towards Gaza City for safety, around 15,000 children under ten years in towns in North Gaza like Jabalia, Beit Lahiya and Beit Hanoun still remain inaccessible and will be missed during the campaign, compromising its effectiveness. To interrupt poliovirus transmission, at least 90 per cent of all children in every community and neighbourhood must be vaccinated, which will be challenging to achieve given the situation.

"The final phase of the campaign had aimed to reach an estimated 119,000 children under ten years old in northern Gaza with a second dose of novel oral polio vaccine type 2

(nOPV2). However, achieving this target is now unlikely due to access constraints.

Despite the lack of access to all eligible children in northern Gaza, the Polio Technical Committee for Gaza, including the Palestinian Ministry of Health, World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) and partners have taken the decision to resume the campaign. This aims to to mitigate the risk of a long delay in reaching as many children as possible with polio vaccine and the opportunity to vaccinate those recently evacuated to Gaza City from other parts of North Gaza.

“To overcome challenges posed by the volatile security situation and constant population movement, robust micro plans have been developed to ensure the campaign is responsive to the significant population shifts and displacement in the north, following the first round in September. The campaign will be delivered by 216 teams across 106 fixed sites, 22 of which have been added to ensure increased availability of vaccination in areas where recently displaced people are seeking refuge. Two hundred and nine social mobilizers will be deployed to engage communities and raise awareness around vaccination efforts. The time period for the humanitarian pause has been extended by two hours and is expected to run from 6 am to 4 pm daily. As in the first two phases, vitamin A will also be co-administered to children between two to ten years in the north to help boost overall immunity.

“The campaign in northern Gaza follows the successful implementation of the first two phases of the second round in central and southern Gaza, which reached 451,216 children - 96 per cent of the target in these areas. A total of 364,306 children aged between 2 and 10 years have received vitamin A so far in this round.

“Despite the challenges, WHO and UNICEF urge for the humanitarian pauses to be respected to ensure the successful delivery of this second round of the polio vaccination campaign. This is crucial to help curb the spread of polio in Gaza and neighbouring countries.”

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