

Taliban Allow Polio Vaccine Program to Restart in Afghanistan

Taliban leaders also agreed to allow women to be frontline workers for the effort, according to the World Health Organization and UNICEF.



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In an effort to eradicate polio and boost health measures for children in Afghanistan, the Taliban government has agreed to restart a door-to-door vaccination program next month, and will allow women to be frontline workers in the drive, health officials announced on Tuesday.

The announcement, by the World Health Organization and United Nations Children's Fund, is a breakthrough in a country that has been called the "world's polio capital," a place where vaccinators have faced the twin challenges of a lack of access to patients and deadly violence.

The five-day nationwide program to distribute the polio vaccine, which is given orally and in multiple doses, will begin Nov. 8, according to officials. The drive aims to reach about 10 million children, according to Dr. Hamid Jafari, head of polio eradication for the W.H.O.'s eastern Mediterranean region.

More than 3.3 million children had previously "remained inaccessible to vaccination campaigns," according to the statement announcing the drive. Children who are 6 months to 59 months old will also be given vitamin A supplements during the campaign, officials said.

Word of the agreement comes as the Taliban have been showing some limited flexibility in dealings with the outside world as the government seeks desperately needed aid amid an ailing economy and increasing food scarcity.

"We welcome W.H.O.'s effort to launch its polio vaccination campaign in Afghanistan and are ready to help and coordinate," Bilal Karimi, a Taliban spokesman, said. "Women can also participate in this campaign and work closely with health workers to provide vaccinations to our people."

In addition to this polio vaccination program, set to start in early November, "all parties have agreed on the need to immediately start measles and Covid-19 vaccination campaigns," the statement from the United Nations and W.H.O. said. A second polio vaccination program in Afghanistan will be synchronized with one in neighboring Pakistan that is scheduled to begin in December, it said.

Half a dozen more vaccination programs are scheduled to begin next year, according to Dr. Jafari.

In announcing the vaccination program, health officials said the Taliban "expressed their commitment" to allow women to be frontline workers in the drive and "for providing security and assuring the safety of all health workers across the country."

Dr. Jafari said that tens of thousands of women were expected to work in the vaccination effort, as vaccinators, supervisors and managers.

The announcement comes after several attacks on polio vaccinators this year, stifling efforts to inoculate children against the disease. In June, at least five members of two polio vaccination teams were killed in one day during separate attacks in Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan. In the same city, three women working for the government's polio vaccine campaign were shot dead in late March.

"UNICEF is outraged by this attack," the organization said at the time of the March killings. "Frontline health workers should never be a target of violence."

Around the same time of the shootings, there was an explosion at the city's regional hospital, near the compound where the vaccines are stored, officials said.

While no group took responsibility for these attacks, the Islamic State Khorasan, also known as ISIS-K, was active in the east and had claimed responsibility for similar attacks on women and civil society leaders in the area.

The Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in August, two decades after the American-led invasion of the country drove the group from power. The new government has committed to providing protection to health care workers.

Health officials welcomed the Taliban's support for the program. In the past, the movement expressed skepticism of door-to-door vaccination drives, saying they believed some vaccinators acted as spies in certain parts of the country. Elsewhere, the Taliban allowed vaccinators to carry out their work in districts under their control.

"We've been working with them for decades," Dr. Jafari said, noting that the Taliban had controlled large parts of the country during their exile from power. The Taliban "have always been supportive of polio vaccination and eradication," he said.

Dr. Ahmed al-Mandhari, the W.H.O.'s regional director for the Eastern Mediterranean, said, "The urgency with which the Taliban leadership wants the polio campaign to proceed demonstrates a joint commitment to maintain the health system and restart essential immunizations to avert further outbreaks of preventable diseases."

Restarting this vaccination program, said George Laryea-Adjei, UNICEF's regional director for South Asia, is "a step closer toward achieving our shared hope of eradicating polio in the region."

Sami Sahak contributed reporting.