



**World Health
Organization**

Western Pacific
Philippines

#VaccinesWork: 488,000 vulnerable children of Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-tawi to receive additional protection from polio

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The World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) continue their support to the Department of Health (DOH) in the remote islands of Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-tawi (BaSulTa) to reach 488,000 targeted children under 10 years old with the polio vaccine.

Children in BaSulTa are at risk of infection from polio because of low vaccination coverage, inaccessibility, and security issues in the island municipalities and barangays. To offer added protection to children in BaSulTa, one of the priority areas, a further three rounds of immunisation for poliovirus type 1 targeting all children below ten years old will be implemented. The immunisation schedules include January 6 to 12 for BaSulTa and Zamboanga City, and Mindanao-wide for January 20 to February 2, February 17 to March 1, and March 23 to April 4, 2020.

DOH announced a polio outbreak in the Philippines last September 19, 2019, with the first type 2 poliovirus case found in Marogong, Lanao del Sur. On November 26, DOH announced the re-emergence of type 1 poliovirus in Maluso, Basilan. On December 6, the first case of polio after 27 years was confirmed in Sabah, Malaysia, and revealed to have genetic links to the polio case found in Basilan.

Lessons learned from the previous vaccination rounds in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) revealed that local government units need additional help, especially those in hard-to-reach areas. The DOH is working with the Bangsamoro government and local government units for the implementation of the polio campaign with technical support from the WHO, UNICEF and other partners.

“WHO recognizes that DOH and local government units have been working tirelessly during the holidays to prepare for this response. The high-level political support has been instrumental in the success we witnessed in the previous rounds, and urge all parties to ensure high coverage during this campaign to ensure that all the vulnerable children in these islands will receive the much-needed protection,” says Dr Rabindra Abeyasinghe, WHO Representative to the Philippines.

“UNICEF is concerned about the plight of children in BaSuLTa and the rest of children in BARMM. They are among the most vulnerable children in the Philippines. Vaccination is the only way to protect children from polio. Vaccines are safe and effective. We must all work hand in hand to stop the spread of the virus,” Andrew Morris, UNICEF Chief of Mindanao Field Office, says.

WHO has been supporting DOH and Ministry of Health BARMM in responding to the polio outbreak by deploying personnel to ensure that vaccination campaigns are planned and implemented effectively. WHO also continues to provide financial support and technical advice on intensifying acute flaccid paralysis and environmental surveillance, and on risk communication, aimed at finally strengthening routine immunization programme in the country.

For the polio response, UNICEF assisted health workers before, during and after each campaign. Before each campaign, UNICEF helped the government procure supplies such as vaccines, freezers, ice packs, and vaccine carriers; facilitated the social mobilization component of the program, enjoining civil society, religious leaders and other influencers to spread messages about polio prevention; and lead the microplanning process with each municipality to ensure each child is reached. During the campaign, UNICEF staff provided technical assistance to overcome challenges in the field. After each campaign, UNICEF staff complemented the DOH’s effort in the conduct of assessments in select barangays to check if any child is missed. UNICEF also provided assistance for proper vaccine disposal.

Immunisation is the most effective way to protect children from polio and stop the spread of the virus. WHO and UNICEF call on parents and caregivers to have their children vaccinated during synchronised polio vaccination rounds in priority areas announced by DOH.