Polio paralyses in 17 children in Mayadin and Raqqa (Syria)

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Seventeen children have been paralyzed by polio following an outbreak of the disease in Syria that the World Health Organization says is "very serious". Earlier this month, the agency reported two polio cases in the Mayadin area of Deir al-Zour province, much of which is controlled by the so-called Islamic State.

Fourteen new cases have now been confirmed in the same area, while another was recorded in Raqqa province. It is the first re-emergence of polio in the war-torn country since 2014.

WHO spokesmen Tarik Jasarevic told reporters that the 17 children with acute flaccid paralysis (AFP) first showed symptoms between 3 March and 23 May, but that lab tests had only recently confirmed that the children had "vaccine-derived" polio, rather than the more virulent "wild" version of the virus, he said.

Regarding the outbreak of vaccine-derived polio in Syria, Mr. Jasarevic said WHO had received confirmation of 15 new cases from the same area of Mayadin, which was south of Deir ez-Zor, and one case from Raqqa. Children who had been confirmed as having vaccine-derived polio had had an onset of AFP between 3 March and 23 May. Under normal circumstances it took 6 to 8 weeks to have lab confirmation of vaccine-derived polio. The outbreak of vaccine-derived polio meant there was significant under-immunization in the community and WHO needed to plan to help vaccinate those children. There were plans to go into the Deir ez-Zor area including Mayadin, and vaccinate 320,000 children under the age of five in Deir ez-Zor and 90,000 children in Mayadin. The preparations for this were ongoing.

In response to questions, Mr. Jasarevic said that there had been a wild polio virus in Syria in 2013 with 36 cases, and it had been stopped. Wild polio virus was even worse that the vaccine-derived polio virus, as it spread more geographically and was more virulent. Vaccine-derived polio, however, was very serious and already 17 children had been paralyzed. As late as March and April 2017, there had been partial vaccination campaigns in the area, but security remained an issue and that’s why many children were not vaccinated. Vaccine-derived polio was polio circulating for a long time and mutating in a way that provoked paralysis in children. The answer to the outbreak was to vaccinate as many children as possible and to strengthen the surveillance of AFP in order to be able to test more if needed. For every child that was paralyzed, there could be as many as 200 asymptomatic cases. The new cases dated from March to May as lab confirmation took time, and there were 15 new lab confirmations from the children captured by surveillance, who had AFP, which could be caused by many things, including polio.

Asked about the case in Raqqa, Mr. Jasarevic said that a health assessment was underway to see if the virus was circulating in Raqqa, or if it was someone who had travelled to Raqqa and then had developed AFP and was tested.

More information can be found at:

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