

THE ISLAMIC ADVISORY GROUP (IAG)

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER, ISSUE 4, JUNE 2017



Al Azhar holds student training workshops



Students from Pakistan and Afghanistan take part in training workshop at IICPSR

Workshops have begun at the International Islamic Center for Population Studies and Research (IICPSR) to train Al Azhar University students on polio eradication, routine immunization, and other maternal and child health issues. Participating students from IAG priority countries of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Somalia, in addition to others from Nigeria, Mali, Liberia, and Indonesia, are in Egypt to study at three faculties of Al Azhar University: the Faculty of Shariah

(which graduates lawyers and Islamic law scholars); the Faculty of Religious Fundamentals (which graduates imams and preachers); and the Faculty of Arabic Studies. The first two training workshops were attended by graduate and undergraduate students on 12 April and 31 May, with the next one taking place on 8 July. Seven more are planned for this year.

In addition to sessions on the different health priorities and related Islamic

rulings delivered by professors from Al Azhar University's faculties of medicine and Islamic studies, the students also received training on presentation skills. At the end of each workshop students from the same country formed workgroups to discuss and formulate ideas on how to approach their local challenges in these areas. Polio eradication was given special attention as the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) sees the lowest number of polio cases in history and works towards seeing the last cases in 2017.

The IAG's student training programme aims to prepare international students of religious studies at key universities across the Muslim world to act as advocates for critical health initiatives in the high-risk areas to which they belong. As future religious leaders and scholars they will be well placed within their local communities to dispel the kind of rumours and misinformation that hamper the work of vaccination teams and deprive their community members from protection against diseases and leading healthy lives.

IAG meets with Islamic NGOs in Pakistan for collaboration



Members of the IAG executive committee and secretariat met with representatives of Islamic NGOs in Pakistan to discuss areas of common interest and possible avenues of cooperation in maternal and child health (MCH) issues including routine

immunization. Mr Irfan Shaukat from the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Dr Albashier Sallam from the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), and Dr Iqbal Khan from the Federation of Islamic Medical Associations (FIMA) led the meetings with three UK-based international Islamic NGOs, namely Muslim Hands, Muslim Aid, and Doctors Worldwide, as well as two national Islamic NGOs, namely the Alkhidmat Foundation and Inter-Religious Council for Health. The meeting at the offices of Muslim Aid also included other members of the Muslim International NGOs Forum (MIF) as well as representatives of the Pakistan CSOs Coalition for Health and Immunization (PCCHI), a coalition

of 81 civil society organizations.

During the meetings which took place in June, the NGOs introduced the IAG to their work across the different regions of the country with thousands of beneficiaries being served in clinics, hospitals, and schools. The IAG introduced the work it has been doing in supporting polio eradication efforts through religious scholars and imams during the past three years, and how it intends to use this experience to support its expanded mandate in MCH and immunization. After the meetings it was agreed to form technical working groups which will help draw up joint action plans to align all efforts for the benefit of at-risk communities.

About the IAG

The IAG was launched in 2013 after consultations between the International Islamic Fiqh Academy (IIFA), Al Azhar Al Sharif, the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) who make up the core membership of the group along with other religious scholars, technical experts and academics. It aims to muster support from Muslim religious scholars and groups, donor countries, and organizations for the global effort to end polio in the high-risk areas of priority countries (Pakistan, Afghanistan and Somalia).

Executive Committee updating Grand Mufti of Egypt on IAG activities



Dr Shawky Allam, Grand Mufti of Egypt (left), received IAG Executive Committee member, Dr Gamal Serour, at the headquarters of Dar al-Ifta al-Misriyyah

Dr Gamal Serour, Director of Al Azhar University's International Islamic Center for Population Studies and Research (IICPSR) and IAG Executive Committee member, paid an official visit to the Grand Mufti of Egypt along with members of the IAG secretariat to brief him on IAG's latest activities.

During the visit which took place on 11 May, Dr Shawky Allam, an eminent member of the IAG, thanked the executive committee and secretariat for their ongoing efforts to execute the IAG's work plan and its activities in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Somalia. He also

commended the work of religious scholars on the ground in those polio-endemic and at-risk countries as they support vaccination workers to reach every child and respond to the concerns and misperceptions of the local communities with regards to the religious permissibility of vaccinations.

Dr Allam also reiterated Islam's teachings to protect maternal and child health, and expressed his belief that expanding the IAG's role into these areas will have a positive impact on the communities of the countries in question.

The National: EC chairman calls for polio support in Ramadan

IAG's executive committee chairman, Dr Yagoub Al Mazrou, called on Muslims during the holy month of Ramadan to direct their charitable spirits and actions towards supporting polio eradication efforts.

In a letter published on 21 June in the UAE's daily newspaper, The National, Al Mazrou called Ramadan "the perfect time for us to

broaden our perception of community" and asked people to "turn your prayers, compassion, and action to our brothers and sisters in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Nigeria who remain at risk of contracting poliomyelitis." He explained the role played by the IAG to support polio eradication in these endemic countries, and warned that "actions and behaviours deliberately or unconsciously

compromising the health and welfare of children are strictly forbidden in Islam and explicitly proscribed in the Quran."

He ended his article commending financial support from donor countries including those in the Gulf, while pointing out that "there is more that we can do to help ... and every little bit counts."

IAG secretariat

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Polio update

8 wild polio cases of type 1 have been reported so far in 2017:

- 3 in Pakistan
- 5 in Afghanistan

Efforts are ongoing through the implementation of national emergency action plans in both countries to address remaining gaps in coverage and surveillance, and in close coordination with each other.

World Health Organization's Regional Director meets OIC and IsDB leadership



WHO's Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean Dr Mahmoud Fikri met with the leadership of two of the IAG's core partners during his visit to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on 8 May.

In his meetings with the Assistant Secretary General for Science and Technology for the OIC, Ambassador Dr Mohammed Naeem Khan, and the Vice President of Operations for the IsDB, Dr Mansour Mukhtar, Dr Fikri had extensive discussions on a number of areas of cooperation, including polio eradication, maternal and child health, and the efforts of the IAG in these priority health areas.

The Regional Office provides technical support to the IAG along with UNICEF, and hosts its secretariat at its offices in Cairo, Egypt.