



Organisation of Islamic Cooperation



## Islamic Advisory Group Adopts Anti-Polio Plan

### Muslim scholars urged to champion eradication push

Cairo, 7 May 2015 – The Islamic Advisory Group for Polio Eradication (IAG) today adopted a new action plan that seeks to help eradicate polio in the few remaining affected Muslim nations and appealed to Islamic scholars and influencers to make as significant contribution as possible to this critical endeavour. The meeting was hosted by Al Azhar at one of its university campuses in Cairo.

Aiming to address some of the most pressing challenges facing polio eradication in endemic countries, Islamic scholars and experts of the IAG agreed in their new plan to partner with key universities in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Gulf States (GCC) to develop special “Islam and Immunization” training modules and curriculums for the purpose of engaging students from affected countries to play a role in polio eradication in their communities.

The Group also resolved to boost advocacy by working with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and charities active in priority countries, and to leverage statements and Friday sermons from prominent Islamic leaders. It decided to approach ministries of health, finance and foreign affairs in GCC and other Islamic donor countries for as much support and collaborations as possible.

In addition, the Group’s plan aims to enhance the work of the National Islamic Advisory Group for Polio Eradication in Pakistan, particularly in the sphere of advocacy and communications, and organize for IAG members’ visits to, and interactions with, religious institutions in priority areas.

In a closing statement, participants reiterated that vaccinating children against polio is not only compatible with Islamic Shariah and teachings but also considered a religious obligation as effective means to protect children’s health and save their lives.

At a meeting in his office with IAG members, the Grand Imam of Al Azhar Al Sharif Dr Ahmed El Tayyeb said he was ready to assign Muslim scholars to go to polio-affected areas in the remaining endemic countries and seek to clarify related misconceptions. He also supported a proposal to enlist Azhar University students from polio-affected nations for advocacy and social mobilization in their communities.

The Islamic Advisory Group also met with the President of the International Islamic Fiqh Academy and Imam of Mecca Haram Mosque Sheikh Dr Saleh Bin Humaid, who for his part agreed to fully support the IAG in implementing its anti-polio action plan.

Al Azhar Al Sharif reasserted its condemnation of all sorts of obstruction against health workers and emphatically rejected allegations that polio vaccination entails risks and Islamic sharia-related restrictions. Al Azhar's Undersecretary Dr Abbas Shouman added that "parents had the sharia obligation of vaccinating their children."

The International Islamic Fiqh Academy asserted that IAG's support for global and national polio eradication efforts is a fulfilment of God's divine commandments and the purposes of Islamic Sharia. Islam assigns responsibility for protection of children not only to parents but also to the entire society, said the head of the Saudi-based Academy's Fatwa Department Dr Abdulqahir Qamar.

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), for its part, invited the IAG to engage its Member States during the 5<sup>th</sup> Islamic Conference of Ministers of Health in Istanbul later this year to secure a completely polio-free world. In its statement delivered by the head of Science and Technology Dr Mohammad Kamran, the OIC reiterated its support for the religious injunctions (Fatwas) "regarding the safety and acceptability in Islam of polio vaccination and declaring it a duty of all parents and communities to protect children and to allow health workers to carry out their duties in safety."

In its statement, the Islamic Development Bank proposed holding a conference of Islamic scholars on polio eradication in Afghanistan, similar to the one held last June on Pakistan. Speaking on behalf of the Bank, the Lead Health Specialist Dr Albashier Sallam said there was a need to work more with effective and action-oriented civil society and other organizations that are distinctly capable of assisting the IAG in implementing its plan.

The Regional Director of the World Health Organization for Eastern Mediterranean Region Dr Ala Alwan stressed the significance of IAG's contribution to the anti-polio battle, urging the Group to "step up and broaden its efforts in collaboration with all relevant national and global polio-eradication partners towards their pressing goals and to make a real difference in the lives of those remaining vulnerable children."

Al Azhar, one of the Muslim world's highest religious authorities and oldest Islamic universities, last year joined the International Islamic Fiqh Academy (IIFA), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) to form the IAG.

The IAG held its first meeting in February 2014 with a mission to help tackle such obstacles snagging polio eradication in Muslim communities as bans imposed on vaccinations by hardliners in certain areas, inaccessibility to children in those parts and elsewhere, persistent fatal attacks on polio workers particularly in Pakistan, misconceptions about vaccines and immunization drives, and other comparable challenges.

The group last year adopted an action plan focusing mainly on support to Pakistan and Somalia, which brought about among other activities an international conference in Islamabad on Pakistan's polio challenges and a meeting of key Somali figures in Khartoum

aimed at starting local action groups to support immunizations in stricken areas. The Group reaffirmed the conformity of polio vaccines to the Islamic faith and tenets.

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