



## **The Islamic Advisory Group for polio eradication concludes its fifth annual meeting with renewed commitment to end polio and expand its mandate to other health priorities**

14 November 2018, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia - The Islamic Advisory Group for Polio Eradication (IAG) concluded today its fifth annual meeting in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, reaffirming a renewed commitment to continue supporting the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, protecting children against all vaccine-preventable diseases and expanding its mandate to support other health priorities in line with OIC health sector agenda.

In a statement issued at the end of the one day meeting, IAG also reiterated its trust in the safety and effectiveness of all routine childhood vaccinations as a life-saving tool which protects children, and acknowledged that it conforms to Islamic Shariah.

The statement also commended and appreciated the efforts made by the governments, communities, health and front liner workers and parents of polio-infected countries to curb endemic transmission of the disease in Afghanistan, Nigeria and Pakistan.

It noted the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Strategic Health Programme of Action (SHPA) 2014-2023, undertaking to support its implementation, notably the areas aligned with the IAG's expanded mandate.

The IAG is an Islamic consortium that comprises experts and scholars representing major religious institutions along with IAG's partners and supporters.

The fifth meeting of IAG was hosted by the OIC, in collaboration with the International Islamic Fiqh Academy (IIFA) and the Islamic Development Bank (IDB).

### **Every human being counts**

In his opening speech, His Eminence Sheikh Dr Saleh Bin Abdullah Bin Humaid, President of IIFA and a member of the Council of Senior Scholars reiterated that “the tasks and activities performed by IAG are based on the principles of Shari’ah and the teachings of Islam as well as the duties the religion calls for in terms of preserving health and saving lives. Religion calls for prevention, avoiding all harms and seeking treatment.”

His eminence also praised the expansion in the mandate of IAG to cover different important health priorities. “Such expansion will definitely increase the IAG's responsibilities and therefore will require more support and more resources.”

In his opening remarks, H.E. Dr Yousef Al-Othaimen, Secretary General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, said: “Four years down the road, it is encouraging to note the

improvement in the polio status in the three countries where polio is still endemic; Nigeria has no polio cases this year and in the remaining two countries transmission has been significantly restricted to just a few areas in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” he added.

“Despite the fact that the polio threat has shrunk to such a small size that we can count and investigate each of the remaining cases, we cannot afford to be complacent for these are not just numbers. These are human beings and every human being counts.”

Representing His Eminence the Grand Imam of Al Azhar Al Sharif, His Eminence Professor Saleh Abbas Goma Saleh, Deputy of Al Azhar Al Sharif reiterated “Al Azhar’s firm stance advocating for polio vaccination, especially verses the aberrant fatwas and perverse opinions that attack vaccination in a way that can only be described as a lie to religion. On the ground, estimates and statistics indicate that the incidence of polio has been reduced by more than 99.9 % from 1988 to 2018, and this decline has been made possible only by the tireless efforts of all partners to eradicate this crippling disease.”

“We thank the World Health Organization, UNICEF and all the scientists, experts and partners who have contributed to this progress to protect humanity.”

In a speech sent to the meeting, His Eminence Dr Shawky Allam, Grand Mufti of Egypt, emphasized that “vaccinating children against polio and other diseases is a religious duty assigned to parents which they cannot and shouldn’t neglect. Only through vaccination they can protect their children’s health and save their lives.”

He added: “We strongly denounce all false fatwas which wrongly claim that vaccination is against the religious teachings and call on those who promote such false allegations to stop causing harm to their children and communities.”

### **Coming so close**

His Excellency Dr Mohamed Jouini, Vice President of the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), noted with admiration IAG’s steady and successful entry into its sixth year despite the tremendous challenges it faces thanks to the tireless efforts exerted by all IAG members to support its activities.

“We appreciate IAG’s role in supporting polio activities in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Somalia that contributed to the reduction of the transmission of polio to the lowest level ever,” he said. “This good sign shows that we are on the verge of declaring the world as polio free.”

The IsDB also commended IAG’s initiative to train and prepare students to become health advocates to increase awareness and to reach every child everywhere.

The WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, highlighted that “for the second time only in the history of public health has humankind come so close to eradicating a disabling and killer disease, poliomyelitis, from the face of the earth.” He added, “Muslim countries have been part of this global effort from the start because it is an absolute in Islam to preserve the well-being and physical health of all children and to enable them to access immunization services.”

At the end of the meeting IAG members issued a statement urging the Governments of Afghanistan, Nigeria and Pakistan to continue to play their leadership roles at all levels to fully implement national emergency action plans, including by securing the engagement of all Islamic scholars, community leaders and mosque imams. It noted that the upcoming low poliovirus transmission season in the three countries, which will run from the last quarter of

2018 through the second quarter of 2019, will provide the best opportunity to stop polio, and hence affirmed IAG's willingness to support all religious scholars, health organizations and Governments in their efforts to interrupt transmission during this period with special focus on high risk communities and regions.

Meeting participants also reviewed the progress of the activities implemented in the priority countries over the past year including the implementation of the training programme of students of religious studies from different Islamic universities that was developed by Al Azhar Al Sharif. The programme aims to prepare future religious scholars and mosque imams as advocates for health in their communities and to dispel rumors and misconceptions regarding the safety of vaccines.

During his presentation to participating IAG members, Dr Yagoub Al Mazrou, chairman of the IAG executive committee, announced that IAG's training manual for religious scholars and students of religious studies on polio eradication and other maternal and child health priorities was translated by Al Azhar Al Sharif into six languages, namely Dari, English, French, Pashtou, Somali and Urdu. This will help replicate the training programme in more Islamic universities where they are most needed.

The roles of WHO and UNICEF were highlighted and the need to support the National Islamic Advisory Groups in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Somalia to better implement their roles at the country level.

For more information visit IAG's website: <http://www.iag-group.org>