

Somali Islamic Scholars Pledge Support for Immunization

National Islamic Advisory Group Established

Hargeisa, 7 December – Somali Islamic scholars concluded a two day meeting on Wednesday that discussed the state of polio eradication and how to protect Somali children from all vaccine-preventable diseases.

The 23 Ulama representing different Somali regions established the National Islamic Advisory Group (NIAG) through which they will work with all relevant governmental and non-governmental stakeholders to support routine immunization as well as vaccination campaigns.

The meeting also hosted representatives of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) to provide technical support to the participants and update them on the latest developments in the field.

In his welcoming remarks to meeting participants, the Minister of Islamic Affairs and Endowment for Somaliland, Sheikh Khalil Abdullahi Ahmed, said that bringing all these different participants together in one event represents a unique opportunity.

“Our aim is to establish collaboration between health and Islamic scholars in order to improve immunity among our children,” he said. “Almighty Allah will hold us accountable to the children who had been paralyzed due to the lack of response to the calls of the WHO to immunize.”

The WHO Representative, Dr. Ghulam Popal, also iterated the important role played by Islamic scholars within their communities with parents and civils society while praising government institutions for their quick response to the 2013 polio outbreak which left close to 200 children paralyzed.

“The dedication of government institutions and their collaboration with their partners in WHO and UNICEF helped stop the outbreak in a very short period of time. We have had no polio cases for the past 2 and half years and we need your support because people listen to you,” he said addressing the Ulama.

Protecting Lives

In a statement issued at the end of the meeting the scholars called upon parents to immunize their children without delay.

“We urge all parents to live up to their religious responsibility and protect their children against polio as well as all other vaccine-preventable diseases including Measles, Tetanus, Hepatitis B, Mumps, Pertussis, Diphtheria, Pneumonia, Pneumococcal Meningitis, and Haemophilus Influenza by immunizing them at the health facilities and during vaccination campaigns,” the statement said.

The NIAG also expressed its confidence in vaccination efforts and its importance for children’s health and preventing permanent disabilities.

“We, the members of the NIAG, have been briefed by the authoritative medical experts and practitioners of this field on the high importance of protecting the lives of children through vaccination.”

The establishment of the NIAG came in fulfillment of recommendations issued by Somali Islamic scholars during a conference that was held in Khartoum in January 2015 in collaboration with the Federal Ministry of Health. During that event titled “Somalia Children’s Health: Polio and Other Immunizations” the scholars called for the establishment of an action group to promote and support immunization activities including polio and to tackle barriers and misconceptions obstructing vaccinations and other critical public health interventions.

The newly formed NIAG will operate under the umbrella of the Islamic Advisory Group for Polio Eradication (IAG), a partnership between Al Azhar Al Sharif, the International Islamic Fiqh Academy (IIFA), the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) along with other religious scholars, technical experts, and academics. The IAG was launched in 2013 in order to combine the correct religious and technical information related to polio vaccination and share that understanding with the concerned communities. This will be the third such national group to be formed following the ones in the polio-endemic countries of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Note to the Editor

Polio is a virus that has paralyzed and killed mostly children for thousands of years. At the World Health Assembly in 1988 Ministers of Health of the member states set the goal to eradicate the disease at a time when the number of polio cases was estimated to be at 350,000 in 125 countries.

Today polio is at its lowest point in history, with only 34 cases reported so far in 2016: 18 in Pakistan, 12 in Afghanistan, and 4 in Nigeria. This represents a decrease by over 99.9% from 1988. But eradicating polio from these last remaining strongholds has proven to be a challenge requiring the exertion of special efforts by all partners involved. This also includes maintaining vaccination work in at-risk counties such as Somalia where the last reported case of polio was in August 2014.

Once successful, the eradication of polio will be only the second time in history that a communicable disease was eradicated from the world through human effort. The first success came with smallpox which was declared eradicated in 1980 after a global vaccination campaign was led by the WHO.

Unlike most other diseases, polio can be eradicated because it is not transmitted by vector, only infects humans, does not survive long in the environment, and a safe and effective vaccine is available.