

## Summary of Polio-Related Attacks on Health Workers

Since 1988, more than 2.5 billion children have been immunized against polio through programs in more than 200 countries involving some 20 million volunteers and an international investment of over US\$8 billion. By 2006, polio cases around the world had decreased by over 99% and remained endemic in only four countries – Afghanistan, India, Nigeria and Pakistan – with a handful of other countries reporting sporadic cases. In 2008, the World Health Assembly called for the formulation of a concerted global strategy to eradicate polio from these remaining countries and create a polio-free world. This led to the *Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) Strategic Plan 2010 – 2012*, an aggressive action- and time-specific initiative to end polio transmission in the remaining areas where this persisted.<sup>1</sup>

An Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) was created to monitor the GPEI's Strategic Plan. At the time of release of the IMB's sixth and latest report in November 2012, all but 0.1% of polio had been eradicated globally: there were 350,000 cases in 1988 and just 175 by the time of the report in 2012. While it was clear that the goal to rid the world of polio by the end of 2012 would not be achieved, the report was congratulatory and stated that the disease had never been more tightly controlled.<sup>2</sup> Further good news came in January 2013 when India was declared polio-free by the WHO after completing two years of not seeing a single case of polio – a remarkable achievement – though the international medical community concurrently urged for continued immunization and surveillance vigilance given India's proximity to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

As India was enjoying success in the fight against polio, the worst tragedy in the history of the eradication campaign struck Pakistan. In December 2012, nine anti-polio workers were murdered by gunmen believed to be from the Pakistani Taliban, leading to a suspension of the polio eradication program by the UN. Just two weeks later on New Year's Day 2013, a further seven community development workers were killed allegedly by the same group and most likely also because of their association with anti-polio work. The majority of the victims were women.

While some blame these murders on the breakdown of local governance and security in Pakistan, others consider them a clear repercussion of the CIA's widely criticized strategy to use a fake polio immunization program to locate Osama bin Laden in March 2011. In this operation which the agency has since admitted to, the CIA recruited a senior Pakistani doctor, Shakil Afridi, to lead polio immunization in Abbottabad after American Intelligence officers discovered that the fugitive Al-Qaida leader's compound was located there. To confirm that Bin Laden himself was actually located here before mounting a risky operation, the CIA needed a DNA sample from any of the Bin Laden children in the compound to compare with a sample from his sister, who had died in Boston in 2010, to confirm that the family was indeed present. A nurse on Afridi's team managed to gain entry into the Bin Laden compound to administer the vaccine and, although a DNA sample was never obtained, the operation aided the mission that led to the killing of Bin Laden in May 2011. The Pakistani intelligence became aware of Dr. Afridi's activities during the investigation into the US raid on Bin Laden's compound and he has since been tortured and sentenced to 33 years imprisonment for high treason.

The global attention given to polio-related controversies and killings has led to it being held hostage in the negotiation for political and other underlying grievances. For example, Pakistani community leaders have boycotted the program in demands for access to safe water and adequate power supplies. Furthermore, Taliban commanders have repeatedly announced the banning of anti-polio work in areas of Pakistan under their control to force the US to end drone strikes, saying that the immunization program is a cover-up for US espionage to inform these attacks. While such claims would have been

considered fanciful prior to 2011, the CIA incident has caused a loss of innocence in the sanctity of the absolute benevolence of global health initiatives such as immunization. The outrage of the global health community at the CIA strategy was demonstrated in January this year by the coming together of 12 deans from prominent schools of public health across the US, including Columbia, Harvard and Johns Hopkins universities, to compose a letter to President Obama expressing the unacceptability of the strategy. Part of the letter said:

*“Independent of the Geneva Conventions of 1949, contaminating humanitarian and public health programs with covert activities threatens the present participants and future potential of much of what we undertake internationally to improve health and provide humanitarian assistance. As public health academic leaders, we hereby urge you to assure the public that this type of practice will not be repeated.*

*International public health work builds peace and is one of the most constructive means by which our past, present, and future public health students can pursue a life of fulfillment and service. Please do not allow that outlet of common good to be closed to them because of political and/or security interests that ignore the type of unintended negative public health impacts we are witnessing in Pakistan.”<sup>3</sup>*

A further tragic blow to the GPEI came just weeks ago on February 8, 2013 in Nigeria where nine women anti-polio workers were shot dead in Kano by suspected members of the militant Islamist group, Boko Haram. Activist Shehu Sani, president of the Civil Rights Congress of Nigeria, said, "Boko Haram and the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan share a common ideology and common strategy and also pose a common danger. If you observe their methods of operation, their targets are similar. Boko Haram have targeted police stations, politicians, religious clerics who speak out against them and people engaging in polio vaccination programmes."<sup>4</sup> This heralds a renewed hostility towards polio immunization activities in Nigeria which originally began in 2003, when a Kano physician heading the Supreme Council for Sharia in Nigeria questioned the motives of the West, leading to the widespread belief and assertion by religious clerics that the anti-polio program is in fact an attempted to sterilize Muslim children. Subsequent boycotting of polio eradication across northern Nigeria led to the disease spreading to 20 other African countries and even overseas as far as Indonesia. A decade on, Nigeria is still facing violence against immunization workers and struggling to control polio: the GPEI reported 121 new cases last year in Nigeria, compared with 58 in Pakistan and 37 in Afghanistan.

As the GPEI approaches the release of its *Polio Eradication and Endgame Strategic Plan 2013 – 2018*, the attitude towards this final push for eradication cannot be 'business as usual'. Every aspect of local and international political, cultural and operational dynamics needs to be anticipated and managed if the campaign is to come to completion. While public health efforts are valuable in their own right and can support the strengthening of global security and cooperation, they cannot justify putting health workers in the way of mortal danger. The recent spate of targeted killings of anti-polio workers in Pakistan and Nigeria should serve as a wake-up call for the global health and humanitarian communities to reflect and re-evaluate their roles in regaining a mutual respect between the actors for global security and stability, and the public health community.

1. Global Polio Eradication Initiative: <http://www.polioeradication.org/Aboutus/History.aspx>
2. Report of the Independent Monitoring Board of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, November 2012: [http://www.polioeradication.org/Portals/0/Document/Aboutus/Governance/IMB/7IMBMeeting/7IMB\\_Report\\_EN.pdf](http://www.polioeradication.org/Portals/0/Document/Aboutus/Governance/IMB/7IMBMeeting/7IMB_Report_EN.pdf)
3. The Huffington Post, January 10, 2013: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/10/cia-polio-vaccine-hoax\\_n\\_2450726.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/10/cia-polio-vaccine-hoax_n_2450726.html)
4. The Guardian, February 8, 2013: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/feb/08/polio-workers-nigeria-shot-dead>