

Beat: Health

WHO declares Southeast Asia region polio-free

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USPA News - The World Health Organization (WHO) on Thursday certified its South-East Asia region polio-free after no confirmed cases were reported in three years, taking the percentage of the world's population living in a polio-free region to 80, officials said. The WHO, calling Thursday's announcement an "important step towards global polio eradication," said the South-East Asia region was certified to be polio free by an independent commission.

The region, inhabited by a quarter of the world's population, includes 11 states: Bangladesh, Bhutan, North Korea, India, Indonesia, Maldives, Myanmar (Burma), Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Timor-Leste. An independent panel came together for two days to review countries part of the region and make sure they met the criteria. The panel included 11 experts in public health, epidemiology, virology, clinical medicine and related specialties, which composed the South-East Asia Regional Certification Commission for Polio Eradication (SEA-RCCPE). A decision was reached, concluding that 11 of the countries within the region were free of polio and therefore could be certified, making South-East Asia the fourth of six regions to receive the certification. A region can only be certified when several conditions are met, which include: at least three years of zero confirmed cases, excellent laboratory-based surveillance of the poliovirus, demonstrated capacity to detect, report, and respond to imported cases of poliomyelitis, and, since 2000, to assure safe containment of polioviruses in laboratories. "This is a momentous victory for the millions of health workers who have worked with governments, nongovernmental organizations, civil society and international partners to eradicate polio from the Region," said Dr Poonam Khetrpal Singh, Regional Director for the WHO South-East Asia Region. The certification is proof that polio eradication programs have increased their abilities to deliver health services to the most vulnerable places and people, due to having reached the "unreached," Dr. Singh explained, adding that vulnerable communities have been identified and there is no excuse to go back without other health care services, "from how to have a safe birth, to where to get access to tuberculosis treatment and how to prevent HIV infection." Eradicating polio has become the stepping stone towards improving vaccination and health care services for other childhood diseases. This is because health personnel and community workers have been trained and provided with equipment, allowing them to also help vulnerable communities with other diseases, according to the WHO. These networks also play a critical role in aiding those effected by bird flu. The eleven countries in the South-East Asia region are prepared to introduce the inactivated polio vaccine (IPV), as a routine in phasing out oral polio vaccines (OPV). More than 120 countries still use OPV, but plans call for IPV to be introduced by the end of 2015 in an effort to create a polio-free world by 2018. But Singh warned to stay observant of the importation of polio, emphasizing that all countries are still at risk and the region's polio-free status remains fragile. "High immunization coverage can prevent an imported virus from finding an under-immunized, susceptible population. A sensitive surveillance system, able to quickly detect and identify any importation and guide a programmatic response, is critical," she said.

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