

UNICEF: Gaza polio vaccination one of the most dangerous campaigns on Earth



Children wait to receive polio vaccinations in Deir el-Balah in the central Gaza Strip on September 4, 2024. (AFP)

Geneva, September 4 (RHC)-- The United Nations' Children Fund (UNICEF) says even with a partial pause in hostilities in Gaza, polio vaccination of Palestinian children was among the most difficult and dangerous campaigns in the world.

The agency said Wednesday that more than 500 teams deployed across central Gaza this week, administering the vaccine to children under 10.

The campaign reached 189,000 children, UNICEF said, surpassing its target and providing a "rare bright spot" for the besieged Palestinian territory. Yet, she said, "This is among the most dangerous and difficult vaccination campaigns on the planet."

She said that Gaza, devastated by Israel's 11 months of war, "is already the most dangerous place in the world to be a child, and even with a polio pause, the vaccination campaign faces grave danger and immeasurable obstacles, including damaged roads and health infrastructure, displaced populations, looting and disrupted supply routes." Khodr however said the risk of polio spreading in Gaza and beyond still "remains high."

The World Health Organization (WHO) also announced the completion on Wednesday of the first phase of its vaccination campaign in central Gaza. WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said in a post on X that the effort exceeded its target of 156,000 children for the area.

However, "to ensure no child is missed", medical teams will continue to offer vaccinations at "four fixed sites" in central Gaza for three more days, he said.

The vaccination campaign will now move to the southern and northern areas in Gaza.

The aid group Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) says Israel's strikes were behind the polio outbreak in Gaza, calling for an immediate ceasefire in the besieged strip.

UNRWA chief Philippe Lazzarini hailed the "great progress," that is being made in the vaccination campaign, but said a permanent ceasefire is needed to ease humanitarian suffering in Gaza.

The massive campaign effort was prompted by the discovery of a polio case in a baby boy last month, the first in the Gaza Strip for 25 years.

Polio, the highly contagious disease that poses a serious threat to the nervous system and can potentially lead to paralysis or death, started to spread in the territory, where the vast majority of people have been displaced, often multiple times.

Health experts say Israel's destruction of the territory's health and sanitation infrastructure has been behind the outbreak of the deadly disease.

A permanent ceasefire is needed to ease humanitarian suffering, the main UN agency for Palestinians said on Wednesday.

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