

Pakistan polio cases at 14-year high after threats

October 3 2014, by Sajjad Tarakzai

The number of polio cases recorded in Pakistan has soared to its highest level in 14 years after attacks on immunisation teams led to a surge in incidences of the disease, health authorities said.

"We have recorded 15 fresh cases of [polio](#) in last two days, the number of polio cases has reached 202 for this year," a senior official at the Pakistan National Institute of Health in Islamabad told AFP on Friday, adding that the annual tally had surpassed the previous record of 199 cases in 2000.

A WHO official in Islamabad confirmed the figures.

Saira Afzal Tarar, Pakistan deputy minister for health, said the fresh cases came from the areas where "polio teams received threats".

"All these cases were recorded in the areas where we have security problems," Tarar told Pakistan's private TV channel 'Express News'.

Tarar said the polio "virus is active in the same areas where polio teams had difficulties". She asked the local authorities to launch a comprehensive campaign and to reach and vaccinate all those children who had missed previous inoculation.

Pakistan is one of only three countries in the world where polio remains endemic but efforts to stamp it out have been badly hit in recent years by attacks on immunisation teams.

Some 59 people including health workers and police providing security have been killed in militant attacks on polio vaccination teams since December 2012.

Officials said 136 cases reported were from the troubled northwestern tribal areas that border Afghanistan and are home to Taliban and Al-Qaeda militants.

Tribal ban on vaccinations

Local warlord Hafiz Gul Bahadur, first banned polio vaccinations in Pakistan's troubled tribal region of Waziristan in June 2012 which was later endorsed by tribesmen and other militants groups in rest of the tribal districts and in the adjacent Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

Their ban—at the time was to protest against US drone strikes and because they allege that the anti-polio campaign is a cover for espionage—risked the health of tens of thousands of children, particularly in the northwest, officials say.

Militants had in recent past attacked polio vaccination workers in other parts of Pakistan including country's largest Karachi city, also capital of Sindh province, which recorded 18 polio cases this year, most of them in Karachi.

The troubled northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province which borders tribal areas recorded 36 cases.

Officials said the strain of the virus which is prevalent in Pakistan had spread to neighbouring Afghan provinces. Afghanistan has recorded a total of seven cases this year.

Polio cases in Pakistan reached a low of 28 in 2005 but rose to 198 in

2011, while 93 were recorded in 2013.

Officials have said tens of thousands of children were missing a polio eradication campaign every year "because of the law and order situation," in tribal areas as well as family and parents unwilling or afraid to vaccinate.

As Pakistan moves into its post-monsoon period, officials fear the final figure could rise as high as 250.

Militant opposition to vaccination has increased after Pakistani doctor Shakil Afridi attempted to help the CIA track down Al-Qaeda terror chief Osama bin Laden through a fake vaccine project.

The highly infectious disease affects mainly the under-fives and can cause paralysis in a matter of hours. Some cases can be fatal.

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