

Religious leaders in three countries rally to eradicate polio

by [John Zarocostas](#)

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Geneva (ENInews)--Health ministers and officials from Afghanistan, Nigeria and Pakistan said here on May 24 that support from Islamic leaders is helping efforts to eradicate polio.

The three countries are the world's only remaining polio-endemic nations, where transmission of the paralyzing disease has never stopped.

A global polio campaign initiative, spearheaded by the World Health Organization (WHO), Rotary International, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and UNICEF, launched on 24 May an emergency action plan to boost vaccination coverage in the three countries.

The endorsement of the campaign by more than 20 Muslim scholars, including grand imams, from different sects of Islam, has been a big help, said Shahnaz Wazir Ali, special adviser on polio eradication to the prime minister of Pakistan.

All of them, she told reporters, "have come on board ... and they have fully supported the vaccination campaign, particularly addressing it from the religious perspective."

These endorsements say "Islam, does not, in no way, form, or manner, prohibit the intake of oral polio vaccine, and that the vaccine being given to children, is endorsed by them and is fully safe," she added.

The scholars have issued fatwas (authoritative opinions based on Islam) that say it is the responsibility of Muslim parents to immunize their children.

In the past, refusal to vaccinate children due to rumors that the vaccines were not safe, could sterilize people, or were contrary to Islam, adversely affected the polio

campaigns, especially in parts of Nigeria and Pakistan.

Mohammad Taufiq Mashal, director-general for preventive medicine at the Afghanistan ministry of public health, said the government, "is using the religious network such as mosques, as a potential source for social mobilization and demand creation."

As of May 15, 2012, 55 cases of polio were detected around the world, 52 of which were in Pakistan, Nigeria and Afghanistan.

In 1988, more than 125 countries had endemic polio and more than 350,000 cases were reported.

Outbreaks in recent years in China and West Africa have been traced to importations from endemic nations and underscore the continued threat of resurgence.

"Polio eradication is at a tipping point between success and failure," said WHO chief Margaret Chan.

Kalyan Banerjee, president of Rotary International, said, "we know polio can be eradicated ... it is now a question of political will ... do we choose to deliver a polio-free world to future generations, or do we choose to allow 55 cases this year to turn into 200,000 children paralyzed for life, every single year."