

Kenya Catholic bishops call for polio vaccine boycott

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July 29, 2015

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NAIROBI, Kenya (RNS) Roman Catholic bishops in Kenya have urged citizens to boycott a mass polio vaccination campaign, unless the safety of the vaccine has been confirmed through scientific tests.

The oral vaccination campaign, by the World Health Organization and UNICEF, is scheduled to begin in Kenya on August 1.

Ahead of the campaign's launch, the bishops questioned the safety of the vaccines, saying the manufacturer failed to provide requested information and the government disregarded the bishops' request for tests.

The government Ministry of Health defended the vaccine in a statement issued Tuesday (July 28).

"Any attempts aimed at mobilizing the public against taking their children for vaccination is a serious violation of the right of children to health and survival," said Nicholas Muraguri, director of Kenya's Medical Services, in the statement. "The ministry of health once again reassures the public of the safety of all vaccines used in Kenya. . . . I therefore appeal to all stakeholders, especially the leadership of the Catholic Church, to continue supporting" the immunization campaign in Kenya.

Polio is a highly infectious disease caused by a virus. It invades the nervous system and can cause irreversible paralysis in hours. It can strike at any age but mainly affects children under age five, according to the Global Polio Eradication Initiative. There is no cure; the strategy to eradicate polio is based on preventing infection by immunizing every child until transmission stops spreading.

"We are not in conflict with the Ministry of Health, but we have an apostolic and moral duty to ensure Kenyans are getting safe vaccines," Philip Anyolo, chair of the

Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops, told journalists at a news conference in Nairobi.

Early this year, the bishops tangled with government after the clerics claimed a mass neonatal tetanus vaccination campaign was a disguised form of population control. The government and the bishops later agreed to test all vaccines before, during, and after the campaign, according to the bishops.

“We are not fighting anybody, but we are saying let us determine our destiny,” said John Njue, a cardinal and the bishop of Nairobi. When medical products such as vaccines “are formulated from outside and there are problems, it is our people who suffer. That’s why we are voicing this issue.”