

Stopping polio to make a comeback

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Rotary International and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) have joined hands to address the funding gap in the new strategic plan announced by Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) towards Polio Eradication. Considering the projected cost of USD 5.5 billion in the 6 years GPEI '2013-2018 Strategic plan' against Polio, BMGF has announced to contribute twice the amount raised by Rotary International, one of the spearheading partners of the GPEI. Rotary and the Gates Foundation are determined not to let polio make a comeback.

Rotary International since the inception of the global campaign has contributed USD 1.2 billion and continues with its funding effort to ensure the campaign does not suffer for want of funds. In 2007, the Gates Foundation gave The Rotary Foundation a \$100 million challenge grant for polio eradication, and in 2009, increased it to \$355 million. Rotary agreed to raise \$200 million in matching funds by 30 June 2012, but Rotarians in fact raised \$228.7 million toward the challenge. Rotary International's Annual Convention took place in Lisbon, Portugal (23-26 June) where more than 20,000 Rotarians from around the world attended the prestigious event. Polio eradication featured highly on the agenda, as in past years. John Germ, vice chair of the International PolioPlus Committee, asked Rotarians to help the funding through their efforts and "reach out to their non-Rotarian colleagues to raise money for polio eradication".

Motivating Rotarians for the challenge, "Going forward, the Gates Foundation will match two-to-one, up to US\$35 million per year, every dollar Rotary commits to reduce the funding shortfall for polio eradication through 2018," said Mr Jeff Raikes, CEO, BMGF, at the Rotary International's convention's held in Lisbon, Portugal. The estimated cost of the initiative's 2013-18 Polio Eradication and Endgame Strategic Plan is \$5.5 billion and a funding commitment of \$4 billion has been announced at the Global Vaccine Summit in April 2013. But unless the current deficit is met, the anti polio campaign is not full-proof. The campaign can be affected to an extent as the immunization efforts need to be sustained in all parts of the world. The joint effort, called End Polio Now - Make History Today, "If fully realized, the value of this new partnership with Rotary is more than \$500 million (approx. 3000 crores). In this way, your contributions to polio will work twice as hard", added Raikes.

Analyzing the critical phase at which 'Polio end game is at present, Mr. Deepak Kapur, chairman, Rotary's India National Polio Plus Committee (INPPC), who has been leading the effort for Rotary in India for the last more than a decade said, "GPEI's 6 year end polio strategy is a global immunization plan with the goal of ending polio while improving efforts to protect all children, including the most vulnerable, with life-saving vaccines".

India has gone over two successful years without a case of Polio and the surveillance and monitoring report indicate another strong year for India to finally clinch the regional Polio-free Certification in 2014. However, the danger of virus importation exists because of the neighbouring polio endemic countries looms large. The eradication effort in Pakistan has been sabotaged by radical groups who have targeted Polio workers killing some despite which the campaign is struggling back to track in the country. Recent setbacks in the African countries and the conflict in Pakistan and Afghanistan, there are a lot of questions arising on whether the world can actually be Polio free by 2018 as set by GPEI. "Since the 6 year plan addresses all possible issues related to Polio outbreak, the strategy should not be affected due to financial crunches. If allowed Polio can rebound and consequently, within a decade more than 2,00,000 children worldwide could be paralyzed every year challenging countries like India where a child is born every second and needs protection", Chairman Kapur added.

Globally, Polio has decreased by 99 percent to just 69 cases this year (as of 19 June), and only three countries - Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria - remain endemic for the disease. Rotary along with all the GPEI partners are determined not to let polio make a comeback. Rotary, the initial donor to the GPEI has pledged its commitment through 2018 to raise funds and mobilize support of the endgame strategy. The extensive polio eradication infrastructure established by the GPEI is also helping to fight measles, malaria, and other diseases, along with aiding response to disaster-related health emergencies. After polio is eradicated, the endgame plan calls for the transfer of the GPEI's assets to ensure lasting public health benefits.