Mass immunization campaign against polio begins, Ministry of Health introduces new polio vaccine (IPV)

On 22 and 24 November 2015 WHO facilitated two Health Sector meetings in Rakhine state, the first held in Sittwe by the Director General of the Public Health Department and the other held in northern Rakhine, with the participation of the Deputy Rakhine State Health Director and of the Township Medical Officers from Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships. During the meetings, local and international health partners committed their support to the government to conduct a planned mass polio vaccination campaign in 15 high-risk townships across Myanmar.

Earlier this year, two cases of vaccine-derived polio virus infection were reported amongst children in Maungdaw Township, Rakhine State. The emergence of such cases of vaccine-derived polio virus is due to low population immunity resulting from low immunization coverage. The routine immunization coverage in Rakhine state has been below 80% for the last years. In 2014, in some of the State's townships only 27% of children received the three recommended doses of oral polio vaccine (OPV).

The most effective way to stop the circulation of this virus is to increase the immunity of children through increased routine immunization coverage. Therefore, WHO and UNICEF are supporting the Ministry of Health to conduct a mass polio vaccination campaign across Myanmar, targeting more than 2 million children under 5 years of age. The campaign started off in early December, with the first rounds of vaccination (scheduled on 5-7 December, 26-28 December and 16-18 January) conducted across 15 high-risk townships in Rakhine, Chin, Magway, Bago and Ayeyarwady. Two additional rounds of polio vaccination will be conducted in another 87 townships in January-February 2016.

Furthermore, on 3 December 2015 the Ministry of Health introduced the use of Inactivated Polio Vaccine (IPV) in addition to OPV across Myanmar. This will reduce the risks of outbreaks of vaccine-derived virus, as well as of poliovirus type 2 after the global “switch” in April 2016 from trivalent to bivalent oral polio vaccination as recommended by the World Health Assembly. The Polio Eradication and Endgame Strategic Plan 2013-2018, approved by WHO in January 2013, requires in fact the phased removal of all OPVs in countries around the world. Introducing the IPV will eliminate risks of vaccine-derived outbreaks from future immunization rounds and will boost immunity against polio types 1 & 3.

Myanmar is the eight country in the WHO South-East Asia region to introduce the IPV vaccine in their routine immunization program.
The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) conducts an *ImPACT* mission to assess Myanmar’s cancer control capacity and needs

According to IARC, Myanmar is expected to see new cancer cases rising substantially by 2030; incidence is projected to increase by 66%, and deaths by 74%. Accessing cancer services is difficult for the majority of the population that lives in rural areas, as the cancer facilities are located in urban centres.

A delegation from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) conducted a mission in Myanmar as part of IAEA’s Programme of Action for Cancer Therapy (PACT), in collaboration with experts from the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), WHO and Myanmar’s cancer control stakeholders based in Nay Pyi Taw, Yangon and Mandalay. The mission was initiated at the request of the Ministry of Health, as part of Government’s efforts to strengthen cancer control.

The mission aimed to carry out a complete assessment of Myanmar’s cancer care and control capacities, as well as to advise on integrating radiation therapy efforts into a comprehensive national cancer control strategy. In particular, the delegation identified needs in the areas of cancer control planning, cancer information and registration, prevention, early detection, diagnosis, treatment and palliative care.

During the visit in Myanmar the delegation, headed by Ms Nelly Enwerem-Bromson, Director of the IAEA’s PACT Programme, visited public, private as well as rural health facilities to assess the overall cancer health system in Myanmar. They discussed the current situation with medical superintendents from hospitals as well as with professors and consultants in charge of the cancer-related programmes. On 3rd December the delegation met with H.E. Dr Than Aung, Union Minister for Health, H.E. Dr Win Myint, Deputy Minister for Health, as well as with other senior health officials at the Ministry of Health to present preliminary findings and discuss opportunities to advance comprehensive cancer control in Myanmar.

Commenting on the visit, Ms Enwerem-Bromson said that the mission was “an excellent opportunity to provide support to the Government of Myanmar for strengthening comprehensive cancer control and, as a result, the health system of the country as a whole.” She further remarked, “it is now essential to discuss the provision of equitable and affordable access to comprehensive cancer care services for the people of Myanmar, especially in the light of current discussions on health financing and on achieving universal health coverage in the country.”
Deaths and injuries related to road crashes remain one of the most pressing public health concerns for low- and middle-income countries around the world. As reported in the latest WHO Global Status Report on Road Safety in 2015, 90% of road traffic deaths occur in these countries, even if they only possess 54% of the world’s vehicles. Despite the increased adoption of road safety strategies and policies which target the issue, more has to be done to reverse this alarming trend.

In Myanmar the number of deaths related to road crashes has increased since the last report in 2013, and now totals at a very high 20.3 per 100,000 people. Myanmar is now 2nd only to Thailand within the WHO South East Asia Region, increasing from a previous ranking of 6th out of 11 countries. Motorcycle crashes are particularly frequent – and deadly.

To address this issue, a multisectoral road safety project has been initiated by the WHO and the Ministry of Health with a focus on the busiest Expressway of the country, the Yangon – Nay Pyi Taw - Mandalay Highway. The project is aimed at multipronged interventions and will serve as a pilot for larger scale operations. Data collection on road crashes and deaths on the Expressway is one of the sub-projects included in the multisectoral strategy.

On 20-21 October 2015 representatives from the University of Public Health of Yangon, the Injury and Violence Prevention Units of the Ministry of Health and of WHO Myanmar and a consultant from the Asian Development Bank met with various stakeholders in charge of the concerned databases for the highway, including the Director of the Expressway Maintenance Department and Police Colonels of the Expressway and Traffic Police departments. What emerged from these preliminary findings is that most deaths and crashes on the highway are caused by over speeding and tyres bursting – which identifies a need for increased vehicle and road maintenance as well as awareness-raising on driving practices.

The team also met with the Director General of Road Transport Administration Department, U Chit Ko Ko, who re-stated the national target of reducing road crashes fatality by 50% by 2020 as well as increasing the use of motorcycle helmets by 90%.

Lastly, to assess the burden on the health system of the country, the team visited three of the main General Hospitals near the Highway – in Nay Pyi Taw, Taungoo and Pyu. The Medical Superintendents of each hospital illustrated their records and analyses of road injuries and related deaths in the past two years, and discussed some of the main challenges that hospitals and health staff face when dealing with increased numbers of patients.

The framework of the multisectoral project is built around the 5 pillars of the WHO Decade of Action for Road Safety 2011-2020, which include efforts towards 1) Road safety management, 2) Safer roads and mobility, 3) Safer vehicles, 4) Safer road users and 5) Post-crash response.
14 November marks World Diabetes Day, the official WHO health day for the prevention and control of this widespread disease. Diabetes is a global epidemic which kills one person every seven seconds and over 5 million every year. The number of people with diabetes globally is projected to rise alarmingly from 457 million in 2014 to 592 million by 2035.

In South East Asia, an estimated 91 million people are affected by diabetes. While Type 1 diabetes is not preventable with current knowledge, Type 2 diabetes is: a healthy lifestyle and frequent health checks can help prevent and delay the occurrence of the disease.

As such, ‘Act Today to Change Tomorrow’ was the theme of the celebrations for World Diabetes Day held at the Ministry of Health in Nay Pyi Taw on 17 November 2015. H.E. Dr Than Aung, Union Minister for Health, inaugurated the ceremony. His Excellency’s address was followed by a presentation by Dr Ko Ko, programme manager of the Myanmar project on Prevention and Control of Diabetes, who illustrated the diabetes situation in Myanmar and discussed actions and strategies to curb the disease.

“Getting to Zero: End AIDS by 2030” was the theme of the World AIDS Day events celebrated worldwide on 1st December, setting the target for the fight against HIV/AIDS as stated by the newly-approved Sustainable Development Goals. At the end of 2014, there were around 37 million people worldwide living with HIV; 1.2 million people died of AIDS-related causes.

Myanmar too has come a long way in the fight against HIV/AIDS: the country has halted the spread of the disease and implemented effective health strategies to curb the epidemic, thanks to the efforts of the government and of all health partners.

To celebrate the progress made so far and discuss further steps, the Ministry of Health organised events across Myanmar to commemorate World AIDS Day. In Nay Pyi Taw, H.E. Dr Than Aung (pictured), Union Minister for Health, inaugurated the ceremony with a speech on HIV/AIDS in Myanmar and on the future steps to address the epidemic in the country. $6 million USD were committed by the Ministry of Health against HIV in 2014-2015.