

SAD VICTORY FOR PAKISTAN'S TALIBAN: CHILD DIAGNOSED WITH POLIO IN REGION WHERE VACCINATIONS WERE DENIED

While much attention is appropriately focused on the horrific and brutal attacks by Pakistan's Taliban on secular political parties as the country approaches elections in its first-ever transition from one civilian government to another, we have news today of a sad triumph by the Taliban as a child in North Waziristan has been diagnosed with polio after the Taliban successfully shut down polio immunizations there last summer.

Health workers are on the cusp of making polio the second disease after smallpox to be completely eradicated from the planet. The latest plan forecasts eradication by 2018, but a huge barrier is that conservative Islamic groups view Western vaccination programs as attempts to sterilize Muslims. In addition, the participation by Dr. Shakeel Afridi in a bogus vaccination program set up by the CIA to obtain DNA samples from Osama bin Laden's compound added fresh fuel to the belief that vaccination programs also are used to spy on Muslims. Just under a month ago, a policeman protecting workers administering polio vaccine was shot and killed:

The latest attack took place in the afternoon in the Par Hoti neighborhood of the Mardan district in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province. The policemen, Raj Wali and Mohammad Ishfaq, were accompanying two female workers on the second day of a three-day anti-polio drive, said Wajid Ali, a local police

official.

The policemen were standing guard in the street as the health workers administered drops inside a house when an unidentified gunman, who appeared to be in his early 20s, walked up to them and opened fire. Mr. Wali was killed and Mr. Ishfaq was wounded, Mr. Ali said in a telephone interview. The gunman escaped.

That killing followed the deaths of eight vaccine workers last December and the violence has led to a significant interruption in the distribution of the vaccine:

In December, at least eight people engaged in polio vaccinations were shot dead in Karachi and the north-west, and in January and February two police officers were killed in similar attacks.

The UN said last month that some 240,000 children have missed vaccinations since July in parts of Pakistan's tribal region, the main sanctuary for Islamic militants, because of security concerns.

And it is from the tribal area of Waziristan where we have today's sad news of a child being diagnosed with polio:

A child has contracted polio for the first time in Pakistan's militant-infested tribal belt since the Taliban banned vaccinations a year ago, a UN official said Monday.

"The new case has been detected in North Waziristan where we had been denied access in June last year," the World Health Organization's (WHO) senior coordinator for polio eradication in Pakistan, Elias Durry, told AFP.

Durry fears that this case is not likely to be

isolated:

“We are worried because this new case comes as an example of a bigger impending outbreak of disease in the region,” the WHO official said.

In addition to making vaccination drives shorter and lower profile while working closely with security, the executive summary (pdf) for the new polio eradication plan has a key step of outreach to religious groups:

4. Religious leaders’ advocacy: markedly step up advocacy by international, national and local Islamic leaders to build ownership and solidarity for polio eradication across the Islamic world, including for the protection of children against polio, the sanctity of health workers and the neutrality of health services.

Unfortunately, I don’t see an open call in the plan for bringing about an end to intelligence agencies undertaking new vaccination ruses, although “the neutrality of health services” would seem to touch on it. Meanwhile, Afridi has started a hunger strike in a desperate attempt to keep his name in the headlines.