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NEWS RELEASE

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Rotary clubs light up the world to stop polio

India's milestone year of no new cases makes Rotary's annual End Polio Now illuminations shine even brighter

EVANSTON, Ill. U.S.A. (Feb. 16, 2012) – In what has become a February tradition, community-based Rotary clubs once again will illuminate landmarks and iconic structures around the world with the humanitarian group's dramatic pledge to End Polio Now.

This year's round of light displays takes on added significance due to the progress Rotary and its partners in the Global Polio Eradication Initiative have made in India. In January, India -- until recently an epicenter of the crippling childhood disease -- reached a historic milestone by marking a full year without recording a single new case.

Worldwide, fewer than 650 polio cases have been confirmed for 2011, less than half the 1,352 infections reported in 2010. Overall, the annual number of polio cases has plummeted by more than 99 percent since the initiative was launched in 1988, when polio infected about 350,000 children a year. More than two billion children have been immunized in 122 countries, preventing five million cases of paralysis and 250,000 deaths.

India's success sends a message of hope across the border to Pakistan, one of the last remaining polio-endemic countries (the others are Nigeria and Afghanistan). Fittingly, Pakistan Rotary clubs will host two End Polio Now displays, one at historic Frere Hall in Karachi on Feb. 17-18 and the other at the distinctly modern WAPDA House in Lahore on Feb. 23-24.

Illumination sites this year include the City Government Building in Taipei, Taiwan (Feb. 23-25); Roppongi Hills Mori Tower, Tokyo's fifth tallest building (Feb. 20); Melbourne's Federation Square, one of southern Australia's top tourist draws (Feb. 25-27); and two famous landmarks in Brazil – the historic Sítio Arqueológico de São Miguel das Missões in Rio Grande do Sul (Feb. 16), and the Palácio Garibaldi, a neo-classical architectural treasure in Curitiba (Feb. 23).

"These global illuminations carry Rotary's pledge to end polio—saying to the world that we will fight this crippling disease to the end," says Rotary International President Kalyan Banerjee, a native of India. "But we are not there yet. Rotary and our partners will continue to immunize children until our goal of a polio-free world is achieved. And we must remain vigilant against a resurgence of this terrible disease."

Illustrating Banerjee's point, teams of Rotary club members from the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and the United States are in India in February to volunteer with their Indian counterparts in massive immunization rounds that reach millions of children under age 5 with the oral polio vaccine. Many volunteers will stay for a Feb. 25-26 Polio Summit organized by Rotary International and the Indian Government.

Rotary club members worldwide have contributed more than US\$1 billion and countless volunteer hours to the polio eradication effort. In January, Rotary leaders announced Rotary clubs had raised more than \$200 million in response to a \$355 million challenge grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which in turn contributed an additional \$50 million in recognition of Rotary's commitment. All of the resulting \$605 million will be spent in support of immunization activities in polio-affected countries.

"Rotary continues to be the heart-and-soul of polio eradication," Gates Foundation Co-Chair Bill Gates wrote in his annual letter issued in January.

The other spearheading partners in the Global Polio Eradication Initiative are the World Health Organization, UNICEF, and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Rotary is a global humanitarian organization with more than 1.2 million members in 34,000 Rotary clubs in over 200 countries and geographical areas. Rotary members are men and women who are business, professional and community leaders with a shared commitment to make the world a better place through humanitarian service. Rotary's top priority is the global eradication of polio.

To learn more about polio eradication, including how to participate in this historic effort, visit www.rotary.org/endpolio. For photos, video or more information please visit: www.rotary.org/mediacenter

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