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Rotary International President Kalyan Banerjee and Afghan President Hamid Karzai meet in support of polio immunization efforts

Historic first visit to Afghanistan by humanitarian organization's top leader

EVANSTON, Ill. (April 4, 2012) — Rotary International President Kalyan Banerjee made history April 2 when he met with Afghan President Hamid Karzai in Kabul to encourage continued national support for the campaign to eradicate the crippling disease polio. He is the first Rotary president to visit Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is one of only three countries where the wild poliovirus has never been stopped. India, Banerjee's home country, was removed from the polio-endemic list in February, and during their 45-minute meeting the two leaders discussed how lessons learned from India's success might be applied in Afghanistan.

"I encouraged the president to keep up the intensity of the immunization program because, by doing so, you can stop polio as we did in India," Banerjee said. "Once it stops, it stops. You don't know when it will happen, or where the last polio case will be; but one day it will happen if you remain ever vigilant."

So far in 2012, Afghanistan has reported five new polio cases out of the 36 recorded globally. The country reported 80 cases in 2011. The other two endemic countries are Nigeria and neighboring Pakistan. Polio infections due to cross-border traffic between Afghanistan and Pakistan are a continuing problem, making bi-national cooperation essential. Pakistan has reported 15 cases this year after posting 198 in 2011.

Poliomyelitis is an acute, viral, infectious disease that mainly affects children and young adults. It was eliminated in the Americas in 1994 and in Europe in 2002.

Rotary medal presented

Banerjee presented Karzai with a special Rotary medal recognizing the leader's commitment to the [Global Polio Eradication Initiative](#), in which Rotary is a spearheading partner. The other partners are the World Health Organization, UNICEF, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Karzai vowed his government will continue to support the eradication program and said he personally would help encourage and educate the Afghan public on the importance of reaching all children with the oral polio vaccine.

In discussing strategies, Banerjee said Muslim leaders who supported India's polio immunization campaign could be encouraged to communicate with their Afghan counterparts to explain the importance of immunizations. Indian Rotary members were instrumental in gaining the support of influential clerics to help dispel misconceptions about polio immunizations within some Muslim communities.

Banerjee also said both countries could exchange teams of health workers so that Indian vaccinators can share best-practice approaches and learn more about the challenges facing polio eradication in Afghanistan.

Accompanying Banerjee on his historic visit were Rotary Foundation Trustee Stephen R. Brown and Fary Moini, both members of the Rotary Club of La Jolla (Calif.) Golden Triangle, which has carried out numerous successful educational projects in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, over the past decade.

Also present were Dr. Ajmal Pardis, chair of Rotary's Afghanistan National PolioPlus Committee, and Mohammad Ishaq, both members of the Rotary Club of Jalalabad.

Rotary priority since 1985

Rotary launched its polio eradication program in 1985 and in 1988 helped launch the Global Polio Eradication Initiative. Since then, the incidence of polio has plummeted by more than 99 percent, from more than 350,000 cases a year to fewer than 700 in 2011.

In addition to raising awareness and advocating within the public and private sectors on behalf of the cause, Rotary members to date have contributed more than US\$1 billion in support of polio eradication. Rotary members recently raised more than \$200 million in new money for polio eradication in response to a \$355 million challenge grant from the Gates Foundation, which then added \$50 million more to the total in recognition of Rotary's commitment.

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.

For more information on polio eradication, visit www.rotary.org/endpolio. For images accompanying this story, visit www.rotary.org/mediacenter.

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