

## Pakistan's Polio Disgrace

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By Ahmed Rashid

For a country of 200m, with a modern economy, an elected democratic government, nuclear weapons and one of the largest armies in the world, today's defining image of Pakistan is that of the principal global incubator of polio - a disease that disables children and was on the verge of being wiped out before Pakistan's lack of governance got in the way.

The World Health Organisation's declaration of a global emergency, and its stipulation that all Pakistanis travelling abroad after June 1 must show they have been vaccinated against polio is considered by many a disgrace to the nation.

The Pakistani Taliban refuse to allow doctors and nurses to vaccinate their children in the far north west of the country. The government has refused to order the army into battle with the Taliban and instead has held unproductive talks with them for the past four months. The Taliban answer since late 2012 has been to murder more than civilian doctors and nurses and security guards who make up the teams trying to vaccinate children. Over the course of a year, the government had refused to heed WHO warnings to take action. Then on May 5, WHO officially declared a major global outbreak, with 74 cases of polio registered this year in Pakistan, Cameroon and Syria; 59 of those cases were reported in Pakistan.

The disease has spread to the city of Peshawar from the neighbouring tribal areas of North and South Waziristan which are under Pakistani Taliban control. WHO officials now say that Peshawar is the world's largest reservoir for polio and that the "Peshawar strain" has now infected children in Syria, Iraq, Israel and Egypt.

Part of the problem lies with the US CIA, which used a fake immunisation campaign in the city of Abbottabad to discover whether Osama bin Laden was hiding in a house there. We all know the outcome of that, but since then the Taliban claim that polio vaccine is an American attempt to sterilise tribeswomen.

The government's failure has been its inability to tell the truth, conduct an honest enquiry or relate an honest and positive narrative about how the disease spreads and who is creating obstacles to its eradication.

Every day on TV talk shows mullahs spread the message of a vast US-India-Israeli conspiracy to plant the virus in order to undermine Pakistan. The latest widely broadcast lie is that US drones are being used to spray the tribal areas with the virus. There is no counternarrative from the government and no attempt to address the basic causes of the spread of the virus.

Instead of subduing the Taliban forcefully, the government has initiated the huge bureaucratic task of inoculating everyone who leaves the country. How is that possible when more than 5m Pakistanis live and work in Europe and the Middle East and return home regularly?

The truth is not even properly conveyed: that 99 per cent of the country is virus-free but that as long as the Taliban refuses to allow vaccination the virus will spread. The Peshawar strain will become more lethal in months to come unless something is done about it. Imagine having the name of one of your most beautiful and historical cities - the pride of its citizens - bestowed on a deadly disease that cripples children.

Several questions arise: why has the military not mobilised the army medical corps - a huge, well-trained, well-protected organisation - to carry out immunisation rather than relying on young unarmed nurses and lightly armed policemen who are easily killed.

Why has the government not put the task of immunisation on a war footing instead of pretending it was some kind of medical side show? Nawaz Sharif, the prime minister, says he wants to improve the rundown economy but how will investment come if investors are scared off?

Why has there been no publicity given to the fact that Mullah Mohammed Omar, the leader of the Afghan Taliban, has demanded that all his commanders in Afghanistan help the UN immunisation campaign in that country, and so far there is no polio epidemic in Afghanistan.

Now major political differences between the army and the civilian government have cropped up so the polio epidemic is hostage to the political wrangling in Islamabad, which shows no sign of resolution. As long as there is no comprehensive military campaign to defeat the Taliban, there can be no immunisation campaign in the badlands. Not surprisingly most Pakistanis are extremely angry. The country was once dubbed the epicentre of terrorism; it has become the epicentre of polio. Pakistanis want and need a government that will take them out of crises and put them back on the path of normality. And yet the agony goes on.

*The writer is a journalist and the author of several books on Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia. His latest book is 'Pakistan on the Brink: the Future of America, Pakistan and Afghanistan'*