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UNICEF Executive Board - General Discussion Statements
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Special Focus Session on Polio Eradication

H.E. Ms. Lachezara Stoeva
Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Bulgaria to the UN
on behalf of Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, and Poland

New York, 8 February 2024

Mister President,

I am delivering this statement on behalf of Czechia, Estonia, Poland, and my own country Bulgaria.

Please allow me to begin by thanking UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of WHO, and Steven Lauwerier, Director of UNICEF Polio Eradication, for their informative and in-depth presentations.

Against an otherwise mostly bleak background for children facing multiple crises, your reports about the final stages in the fight against polio fill us with the optimism that we will soon witness the eradication of only the second disease affecting humans in history. Only two years from now, in 2026, polio may disappear from human populations, ridding humanity of what was once a scourge for children – leading to death, extended treatment in an iron lung or disability.

This optimistic outlook isn't, however, guaranteed and meeting UNICEF's target requires much hard work. The eradication of polio will only be possible through the provision of vaccines to every child. We are happy to hear that the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) has succeeded in vaccinating over 400 million children annually and that polio cases have been reduced by 99% globally.

Mr. President,

We represent four polio-free states – since 1960 for Czechia, 1961 for Estonia, 1982 for Bulgaria, and 1984 for Poland. But the generations that witnessed the horrors of polio are with us and we do not see polio as a part of history or a disease that we are shielded from. We all stand in solidarity with the nations and regions where the poliovirus is still a threat.

We are mindful of the factors affecting children in these areas, making immunizations more difficult: armed conflict, political turmoil, climate disasters, health systems weakened by poverty and related issues like corruption.

Furthermore, we are concerned about the virus' reappearance in states that were previously polio-free. This demonstrates that the war is not over until the very last battle has been won.

In order to eradicate wild polio by 2026 and maintain a polio-free world thereafter, we join and amplify UNICEF's call for support and action by member states to prioritize childhood vaccination and polio eradication. We also believe that the polio immunization effort will bear additional fruits if access to children living in remote and underserved areas is utilized to extend other immunizations and health services.

I would like to close by welcoming the 50th anniversary of the Expanded Programme of Immunization (EPI) in 2024, whose success is the reason for our optimism today. Vaccination against polio is mandatory in our four countries, and the entire WHO European region has been polio-free since 2002, a testament to the efficacy of vaccination initiatives.

I would also like to use this opportunity to remember all scientists and doctors who contributed to polio treatment and eradication. Among them are Czech and Polish vaccine pioneers Dimitrij Slonim and Hilary Koprowski, as well as Bulgarian chemist Dimitar Pascov who first isolated Gelantamine, a compound used to alleviate polio symptoms. We also remember the many innovative Estonian doctors who welcomed the mass testing of Sabin's vaccine in 1961, leading to rapid mass vaccination in Estonia, eradicating polio the same year.

Allow me express our gratitude for the opportunity to engage in this critical dialogue and to reiterate the support of Czechia, Estonia, Poland and Bulgaria for the final efforts to eradicate polio.

Thank you!