

Rotary kicks off major fundraising drive to eradicate polio

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World Health Organization declares polio eradication top operational priority

LOS ANGELES (June 17, 2008) -- In the final push to rid the world of a crippling and potentially fatal disease that has plagued humankind throughout history, Rotary International today launched its US\$100 Million Challenge, a fundraising effort to end polio worldwide.

Funds raised will match, dollar-for-dollar, a challenge grant recently awarded to Rotary by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation -- a funding agreement that will provide \$200 million to the global health initiative over the next three years. Rotary is also expanding its reach by establishing a Web site to accept donations from individuals outside the organization interested in helping eradicate polio:

www.rotary.org/endpolio

Since 1985, ending polio has been Rotary's top philanthropic goal. Since then, polio cases have been slashed by 99 percent worldwide. "While most of the world is polio-free, this vaccine-preventable disease still threatens children in parts of Africa and South Asia," said Robert Scott, chair of The Rotary Foundation of Rotary International. "And because polio is a virus that moves from child to child, it is capable of re-emerging anywhere in the world if we let down our guard. Rotary is committed to eradicating this disease once and for all."

"Rotary International is a global leader in the fight to eradicate polio, and I have no doubt that Rotarians worldwide will rise to this challenge," said Dr. Tachi Yamada, President of the Gates Foundation's Global Health Program. "With Rotary leading the charge, no child will have to live in fear of polio and the world will see that by working together we have the ability to defeat a terrible disease."

As part of a joint keynote address by the leaders of the spearheading organizations of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) to an international audience of 20,000 Rotary members at the volunteer service organization's convention in Los Angeles, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) Dr. Margaret Chan said, "Today, I am making polio eradication the top operational priority of the WHO. We have resolved the technical challenges to polio eradication, but we still need to overcome the remaining logistical and financial challenges to delivering the vaccine to every child."

Polio eradication -- which hinges on vaccinating all children under the age of five years -- is seen as a model and a test for reaching children worldwide with other benefits, whether health or development-related. "It's not just about eradicating polio," Dr. Chan continued. "It's about our ability as a society to reach all children to attain the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals."

"Rotary's \$100 Million Challenge is a continuation of their longstanding commitment to protect every child from this devastating disease," said Dr. Julie Gerberding, Director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). "If not for the generosity, passion and leadership of Rotary members worldwide, it is safe to say that we would not be at the point we are today."

Since the launch of the GPEI in 1988, when polio paralyzed more than 350,000 children in 125 countries, cases have been reduced to 1,307 in 2007, and just four countries remain polio endemic (Afghanistan, India, Nigeria and Pakistan). A two-year intensified effort was started in 2007 to eliminate the last vestiges of polio in these remaining areas. Since then, polio has been stopped under extreme conditions -- conflict-ridden Somalia is now polio-free and the most endemic part of India has seen a dramatic decline in cases (from 520 in 2006 to one so far this year).

"The progress made in some of the most challenging areas of the world proves that with enough commitment and support, we can end polio worldwide," said Ann Veneman, Executive Director of UNICEF. "We hope that the commitment from the private sector will challenge other donors to step up and make sure we have the resources needed to eradicate polio."

As the volunteer arm and top private sector contributor to the GPEI, Rotary has contributed US\$700 million since 1985 -- a figure that will increase to \$850 million when polio is eradicated -- along with countless volunteer hours to the protection of more than two billion children in 122 countries.

The Global Polio Eradication Initiative is spearheaded by national governments, WHO, Rotary International, the CDC and UNICEF. The Initiative currently faces a funding gap for 2008-09 of US\$490 million.

Rotary is a worldwide organization of business and professional leaders who provide humanitarian service and help to build goodwill and peace in the world. Rotary's global membership is approximately 1.2 million men and women who belong to more than 32,000 Rotary clubs in more than 200 countries and geographical areas.

For more information visit: www.rotary.org or www.polioeradication.org

For those interested in helping Rotary eradicate polio visit: www.rotary.org/endpolio

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