

NEWS

Polio is re-emerging in areas previously considered polio free

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Concern is mounting that the global drive to eradicate polio is being undermined by security problems and access constraints that have led to a resurgence of poliovirus in a number of countries previously declared to be free of polio.

On 30 September South Sudan's new health minister, Riek Gai Kok, declared a "national health emergency" after confirming three cases of wild poliovirus type 1 infection. The country had been officially polio free since June 2009, but the health ministry had been on high alert for its reintroduction since an outbreak was confirmed in Somalia last May, which rapidly spread to Ethiopia and Kenya.

There have now been 174 confirmed cases in Somalia, 14 in Kenya, and three in Ethiopia. Major emergency vaccination campaigns have been started in these and neighbouring countries, but vaccinations have been unable to take place in certain no-go areas in Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen.

The Sudanese Doctors' Union warned that the disease could rapidly spread across the border because of a "large immunity gap" caused by the denial of aid access in the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile areas bordering South Sudan, where the lack of

vaccination had left "almost all children susceptible to polio and other vaccine preventable diseases."^{1 2}

On 1 October the union wrote to the UK prime minister, David Cameron, calling on him to denounce the Sudanese government's denial of access to healthcare, after doctors were prevented from treating hundreds of people injured in recent demonstrations.

The union's UK spokesman, Abdelmalik Hashim, told the *BMJ* that Sudan had just experienced the worst outbreak of yellow fever in recent years after the expulsion of aid groups from Darfur, and now "the refusal of the government of Sudan to cooperate with the international community is jeopardising all the gains achieved by the global polio eradication programme since 1988."

- 1 Moszynski P. Healthcare in South Sudan is jeopardised by attacks on hospitals. *BMJ* 2013;346:f3265.
- 2 Moszynski P. Only one doctor is left working in rebel controlled Nuba Mountains. *BMJ* 2013;346:f759.

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