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Largest ever, life saving campaign to reach 1.5 million Somali children

Child Health Days launched to deliver high-impact interventions for children at community level.

Nairobi, Kenya, Wednesday, 24 December 2008 – Over 1.5 million children under the age of five and women of child-bearing age across the entire country of Somalia will benefit from a package of preventive care that will be delivered in local communities starting today.

The campaign of 'Child Health Days' was launched in Hargeisa, the capital of northwest Somalia (the self-declared republic of 'Somaliland') by Vice President, Ahmed Yusuf Yasin who urged every family to participate in the campaign, "I recommending to everyone to take their children to be vaccinated. This campaign is important because it will lead to the social improvement and development of Somaliland. The government is committed to its success."

In a country with limited social services, weak health infrastructure and a volatile security situation, where one child in every ten dies before its first birthday, UNICEF and WHO are partnering with local authorities and NGOs to protect children under five against preventable childhood diseases and water-borne illnesses, to reduce malnutrition and to safeguard women against neonatal tetanus in child delivery.

The interventions comprise child immunization against measles, diphtheria, whooping cough, tetanus and polio; Vitamin A supplementation; nutritional assessments; de-worming; the distribution of oral rehydration salts and water purification tablets; breastfeeding promotion; and tetanus toxoid vaccination of girls and women aged 15 – 49.

Speaking at the launch event, UNICEF Representative for Somalia, Christian Balslev-Olesen said "This campaign is historic because it marks the launch of multi-million dollar strategy to improve the survival rates of all Somali children. It is our largest ever campaign and it relies on partnerships for its outreach and its success. By working in partnership, we are aiming to reach every single child under the age of five with this high-impact life-saving package of interventions. Working together, we can protect children and their mothers against preventable diseases. Working together, we are making it possible to improve the lives of every Somali child."

Messages raising awareness of the campaign have been sent via mosques, cell-phones, radio, TV and loudspeakers, and every Somali family is being urged to take advantage of this health care package. More than 3,600 field teams are taking the campaign to urban and rural areas of Somalia utilizing schools, health centres, mosques, and remote areas, mobile clinics.

Kaltun, a 28 year old mother of two, brought her 9 month old son Saad to the launch event to be vaccinated. "I want to prevent my child getting measles and other diseases" she said, "My first child is healthier than this baby because he was vaccinated" Kaltun welcomed the campaign's community outreach. "The [Maternal and Child Health Clinic] is too far; I have to take two buses to get there. I prefer the service to come to me."

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After kicking off in Somaliland, the Child Health Days campaign will continue in January in northeast Somalia (the semi-autonomous region of 'Puntland') and central southern Somalia. The second round of the campaign will be conducted in six months time.

The campaign has been made possible with the support of Denmark, Japan, the US Centres for Disease Control (CDC), the Canadian Committee for UNICEF, USAID and the UN Foundation.

About UNICEF

UNICEF is on the ground in over 150 countries and territories to help children survive and thrive, from early childhood through adolescence. The world's largest provider of vaccines for developing countries, UNICEF supports child health and nutrition, good water and sanitation, quality basic education for all boys and girls, and the protection of children from violence, exploitation, and AIDS. UNICEF is funded entirely by the voluntary contributions of individuals, businesses, foundations and governments.

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