In Focus

Measles outbreak threatens Somalia

In July 2011 alone, 1019 suspected measles cases and 31 related deaths have been reported in South and Central Somalia, representing almost 20% of all reported cases for this year. Compared with the same period in 2010, the number of suspected measles cases has increased with 666% (see graphs). Since January 2011, 5176 suspected measles cases were reported in South and Central Somalia alone.

Measles is a highly contagious viral disease, which affects mostly children. It is transmitted via droplets from the nose, mouth or throat of infected persons. Initial symptoms, which usually appear 10–12 days after infection, include high fever, runny nose, bloodshot eyes, and tiny white spots on the inside of the mouth. Several days later, a rash develops, starting on the face and upper neck and gradually spreading downwards.

There is no specific treatment for measles and most people recover within 2–3 weeks. However, particularly in malnourished children and people with reduced immunity, measles can cause serious complications, including blindness, encephalitis, severe diarrhoea, ear infection and pneumonia.

The major factors for a measles outbreak in Somalia are low coverage, malnutrition, population movements, and over-crowded internally displaced (IDP) camps. WHO fears that the measles outbreak could lead to serious illness and a high number of deaths, especially among the vulnerable IDPs whose overall health is already fragile.

Measles can be prevented by vaccination. The routine immunization against measles in Somalia is 29%. As response to the suspected measles outbreak, WHO, UNICEF, health partners and health authorities kicked off an emergency measles vaccination campaign in all accessible areas of South and Central Somalia. About 2.3 million children aged between 6 and 15 years in 10 regions of South and Central Somalia, including 745 000 children in Mogadishu, will be targeted during this campaign.

\*July 2010: 133 cases; July 2011: 1019 cases