**Pakistan had all but eliminated polio. Then things went badly wrong.**

**By Haq Nawaz Khan and**[**Pamela Constable**](https://www.washingtonpost.com/people/pamela-constable/)

**Dated: May 10, 2019**

**PESHAWAR, Pakistan — Nobody saw it coming.**

**The virus was so close to being wiped out. Millions of young children had been repeatedly inoculated, and in March older ones were added in a final nationwide vaccine push to ensure that Pakistan — one of only three countries where polio remains endemic — could be officially declared polio-free.**

**But another danger was lurking, in the same communities where vaccination efforts had long been underway. It was fear and suspicion, and it was so visceral — and so fast-moving in the digital age — that a single rumor of vaccinated**[**children falling sick**](https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/students-fall-sick-after-being-administered-polio-drops-in-pakistan-parents-ransack-health-centre-2026984)**in a village school last month triggered panic and violence nationwide.**

**Since then, the anti-polio drive has been suspended until July while officials scramble to regroup. Half a dozen vaccinators or their guards have been killed, and new cases of children with numb or paralyzed limbs are being reported every week, setting back years of effort to eliminate the virus, health workers say.**

**“We blundered badly. We wanted to achieve a technical and operational success, a data-driven masterpiece. But we forgot that for a father and mother, the most sensitive thing is their child,” said Babar bin Atta, the government’s top anti-polio official. Despite intensive efforts to educate the public about the benefits and safety of the vaccine, he said, “we underestimated the degree of community resistance.”**

**At a time when fear and rejection of vaccines are rising globally and measles cases are spiking, polio is seeing at least a momentary resurgence in Pakistan. Between 1994 and last year, the number of infected children in Pakistan plunged from 20,000 to just 12. But 15 new cases have been reported this year. Unless the vaccination drive starts up again soon, some health experts fear that new cases could exceed 50 this year.**

**The threat of polio remains relatively low compared with that of measles, which was officially eradicated in the United States in 2000 but appeared in 350 new cases in 2018 and more than 700 this year. Across Europe, 34,000 measles cases were reported in January and February alone.**

**Measles can be fatal, especially to babies, and it caused more than 110,000 deaths worldwide in 2017. Polio, though rarely fatal, is incurable, and it can permanently paralyze a child within hours of infection. It is spread through fecal matter, especially in poor and unsanitary conditions, and is endemic only in Nigeria, Afghanistan and Pakistan.**

**“It is so depressing. One day of drama has ruined three years of work,” said a government epidemiologist in Pakistan, speaking on the condition of anonymity because he is not authorized to speak to the media. “People who used to welcome our teams into their homes are now closing the doors.”**

**The hysteria that started at a school in the northwestern village of Mashokhel — and quickly spread via mosque loudspeakers and WhatsApp — had both unique cultural roots and broader, ­modern-day lessons.**

**Over the past several years, Atta and health officials said, educational campaigns and support from Muslim clerics helped change public opinion, extremist groups were driven from the ­region, and vaccine refusals plunged. But this spring, when officials announced that all children up to age 10 would be required to get polio drops, suspicion began to creep up again.**

**“We created a nuisance,” Atta said. “People got fed up with our teams making so many visits and asking so many questions. It only took one spark.”**

**On April 22, vaccinators spent the morning at a school in Mashokhel, a few miles outside Peshawar, the capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Soon after they left, school administrators reported that dozens of students were vomiting and fainting. Among local residents, long-suppressed suspicions burst into a frenzy. An angry mob attacked the school and burned down the local health clinic.**

**“People were pelting my house with stones,” said Arshad Khan, 35, a longtime local health-care worker. He said that even during the years when Islamist militants were attacking vaccination teams, he stayed on the job. “There is nothing wrong with the drops,” he said, “but this misunderstanding, these fake reports, have hurt our efforts all over the country.”**

**As the news circulated that day via social media and cellphones, frightened parents rushed 40,000 children to hospitals in Peshawar. Health officials later reported that almost all were found healthy and sent home, but by then it was too late to contain the panic. Across the country, hundreds of thousands of parents refused to let their children receive the drops, and the vaccination drive was suspended.**

**Police arrested 16 people in connection with an alleged plot to sabotage the polio campaign, including several staff members at the school, and pernicious messages and videos were posted online that added to the crisis. One showed a man, who was later arrested, instructing schoolboys to lie down on hospital cots and pretend to be sick. Another showed an unidentified man denouncing polio vaccinators as pimps and prostitutes working for the United States.**

**Pakistani officials placed some of the blame on Facebook, saying they were in the process of asking the company to take down the posts. “They call this free expression, but there are some crazy pages with people playing a dirty game,” Atta said, adding that Facebook has millions of users in Pakistan. “They are exhorting anti-polio elements to go after our workers. People are being killed.”**

**Polio workers have long been targeted by Islamist militants, with**[**more than 100 killed**](https://www.newsstandhub.com/the-new-york-times/polio-vaccinator-is-shot-and-killed-in-pakistan)**in the past decade. But over time, the attacks dwindled to a few incidents as public support grew and militancy was quashed. Now, in just three weeks, six vaccinators or their guards have been shot dead in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan provinces. Some attackers, officials said, may not be religious fanatics but tribal militia members trying to “protect” their areas.**

**In Peshawar, people are still shaken by the Mashokhel scare, and this week some said it had revived their suspicion of polio drops. Even some local officials said they plan to refuse to vaccinate their children. Some demanded to know why the government kept focusing on this particular disease and not others that are more common, such as malaria or dengue.**

**“I don’t understand why the government is forcing children to be vaccinated,” said Ashraf Ali, 38, a trading merchant who said he had now decided not to let his 2-year-old daughter receive the drops. “They keep insisting, but I keep refusing. I am the father of my children, and it is my choice.”**

**In Rawalpindi, a large city in Punjab province, water and sewer samples from many poor Pashtun communities have repeatedly tested positive for the polio virus. Health officials said they had hoped to vaccinate about 14,000 children there in the past month, but more than half of the parents refused. Several vaccinators were beaten.**

**Noor Jahan, 30, a veteran vaccinator, made the rounds last week in a Pashtun neighborhood she has visited dozens of times. She chatted with families, trying to convince them that the drops were safe and that their children still needed a series of doses to become immune. People were polite but not really swayed.**

**“Look at how we live. The water is low, the sewers are bad, there is no health care when we get sick. But by hook or by crook, the government keeps bringing these drops to our houses and chasing our children in the street. Why?” said Ahsan Bahadur, 35, a father of two. “This is not up to the vaccine or the virus. It is up to God.”**

***Constable reported from Rawalpindi.***

**Now for the good news**

**Polio update from Aziz Memon Pakistan   **

[**Polio programme introduces reforms after rise in cases**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1483603/polio-programme-introduces-reforms-after-rise-in-cases)

**Dated May 21, 2019**

**ISLAMABAD: The polio programme will undergo major operational reforms after a continuous rise in the number of polio cases across the country. The reforms include reducing the number of visits and follow-ups by polio vaccination teams, eliminating the use of data registers and limiting the number of questions families are asked.**

**Pakistan is one of the last two countries, alongside Afghanistan, where poliovirus cases are being reported.** **A total of 17 cases have been reported this year; six from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, five from KP’s tribal districts, three from Punjab and three from Sindh.**

**Explaining the reforms, Prime Minister’s Focal Person on Polio Babar Bin Atta told Dawn that polio workers used to carry registers that were introduced in 2016, which they will no longer carry. “Polio workers said it was not possible for them to interact and convince families because they spent most of their time filling data in the registers,” he said.**

**The number of questions for residents has also been reduced to prevent them from panicking, he said.** **“Residents will be asked how many children are in the house and how many of them have been vaccinated.** **“Earlier, workers were directed to ask how many couples were in the house, when they were married, how many children they had and if there were any pregnant women in the house and when delivery was expected,”**

**Mr Atta said that during and after every vaccination campaign, polio workers, the area in-charge, the technical tehsil monitor, union council representatives and so on made as many as nine visits.“Now there will only be two visits, by the polio worker and supervisor. It will help to restore community trust,”**

**In response to a question, he said that the next polio vaccination campaign will be held in the second week of June. “Now we will focus on environmental samples, and make sure that the virus is eradicated from the sewage,” he said .A positive environmental sample is one in which the poliovirus is found in sewage water. Samples of sewage water are the basic parameter to determine if polio vaccination campaigns have been successful in an area.**

**A polio case can be reported in any city due to the frequent movement of people from one city to another, but the presence of the virus in sewage water indicates that the vaccination campaign did not achieve its target.** **It also shows that the immunity of local children has fallen and they are at risk of the disease.**

|  |
| --- |
| **The resolve of the Pakistan Health Care Workers on the ground**  **It’s amazing, the effort the vaccinators have to go to here. They cannot fail.”**  **Gulnaz Shirazi, 35, ensures every child entering the social security hospital in the industrial Landhi area**  **of the city is vaccinated. Her deft checks are fuelled by personal involvement. In 2012, as she wrapped**  **up for the day, she heard the shots that killed her sister-in-law and niece, both polio prevention workers,**  **a few streets away. “I decided I couldn’t let their lives go to waste. It just made my resolve stronger.”**  **Khalida Nasareen, 61, first got involved 22 years ago, when she was a local councillor in Orangi Town,**  **in the city’s north. She has been instrumental in recruiting women from the community who have the right skills,**  **education, trust and access. Two health workers were killed in the area in 2012, and it wasn’t easy to persuade**  **parents to allow their daughters to vaccinate street to street for 7,500 rupees.**  **“There was a lot of fear, but that has got better since the community-based approach took off,” she says.**  **“We build up a relationship with families through hearing their problems, knowing them. We can spot the extra**  **pair of shoes by the doorstep that belong to a visiting child.”**  **Now 61, she has taken to getting around by quad bike so that she can quickly be on site if one of her team calls**  **in with problems. Her diabetes means she has numbness in one foot, but nothing will stop her.**  **“You cannot shut the programme until polio is eradicated,” she says. “No young child should get the**  **virus these days.”**  **Published on May 14, 201** |

***Published in Dawn, May 21st, 2019***