

Pakistan sees huge drop in polio cases

Vaccinators reach more people after military operation against militants, leading to 70% fewer cases of disease in a year



A health worker gives a polio vaccine to a child in Lahore, Pakistan. Photograph: KM Chaudary/AP

[Pakistan](#) has seen a major fall in polio cases this year, after a military operation has allowed vaccinators to reach areas previously off-limits because of militant attacks.

There have been 24 cases since 1 January, a decline of more than 70% from the same period last year, when there were 84 cases, the [World Health Organisation](#) (WHO) said on Thursday.

Pakistan is one of three countries worldwide where polio remains endemic, and last year saw a total of 306 cases of the highly infectious, debilitating disease – a 14-year record.

Militants have fought attempts to eradicate polio, saying the programme is a cover to spy on their operations. Attacks on immunisation teams have killed 78 people since December 2012.

Elias Durry, the WHO's senior coordinator for polio eradication in Pakistan, confirmed the drop in cases, saying intensive vaccination efforts were paying off. "Compared to last year, polio cases in Pakistan have been 70% decreased. In 2013 and 2014 the programme was under pressure, but in 2015 the virus is under pressure."

Rana Muhammad Safdar, a senior official at the Pakistan National Institute of [Health](#), confirmed the WHO data.

The government declared war on polio in November 2014, after the 14-year record and in the wake of a damning international report that slammed the country's campaign to tackle the virus as a disaster.

Durry said the main reason for the fall in cases was better access to families in previously unvaccinated areas, where troops have been advancing. "The accessibility of children in places that were not being accessed before ... is the number one reason, including proper implementation of the plan," he said.

Pakistan's military in June last year launched a ground and air blitz against militant groups in the North Waziristan tribal area, forcing millions of civilians to leave their homes and settle in other districts.

All those fleeing North Waziristan were given polio drops as they entered neighbouring Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, allowing health workers to reach families who had not been vaccinated for years.

The Taliban had imposed a blanket ban on polio vaccination in areas it controlled, saying the health initiative was a cover for spying.