



Globally the lowest number of cases of polio have been reported this year but the disease is still endemic in Nigeria, Pakistan and Afghanistan, a high-level event on polio eradication was told which took place on the sidelines of the General Assembly debate at UN Headquarters in New York 27 September 2012.

World leaders, donors and experts hailed at the event a “once-in-a-generation” opportunity to eradicate polio, as they gathered at the United Nations to celebrate efforts that have already reduced the incidence of the crippling and potentially fatal disease by 99 per cent around the globe.

The vaccine-preventable infectious disease raged in 125 countries when the global fight against it began in 1988 under the banner of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI). While India had long been regarded as the nation facing the greatest challenges to eradication, it has been polio free for more than 18 months.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said the success of the final push depended on the “quality” of the world’s efforts in those remaining areas.

He called not only for close cooperation from government, religious, traditional and community leaders, but also for belligerents to play their part in helping end the disease.

“Where there is fighting and insecurity, we need warring parties to allow aid workers to operate,” he told the gathering, which included the participation of Presidents Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan, Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria and Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan. “I appeal to all parties to provide safe passage for health workers to access and vaccinate children.”

The World Health Organization ( [WHO](#) ) spearheads the GPEI, whose ultimate success would mark an early milestone in the Decade of Vaccines, which in turn represents a global vision to provide all children with the vaccines they need.

“No single one of us can bring this long, hard drive over the last hurdle,” WHO Director-General Margaret Chan said. “But together we can.”

A major GPEI donor is the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, whose co-chair, Bill Gates, also spoke of the significance eradicating polio would have for combating other diseases.

“When we defeat polio, it will motivate us to aim for other great health and development milestones,” he said.

GPEI is currently developing a long-term roadmap for ending polio through a strategy whose investment legacy will benefit other vaccine-preventable disease goals. This comes after 194 States of the World Health Assembly declared the final push towards polio eradication to be a “programmatically emergency for global public health.”