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Strain of Polio From West Africa Stirs Fears in Ethiopia, U.N. Says

By DONALD G. McNEIL Jr.

The resurgent wave of polio making its way across Africa has reached Ethiopia, which is now trying to raise \$15 million to stop it, World Health Organization officials said yesterday.

Ethiopia is one of Africa's most populous countries, with 68 million people, so the danger there is particularly great, the officials said. It had been polio-free since 2002.

"This just blows our planning to helter-skelter," said Dr. David L. Heymann, the W.H.O. director general's representative for polio eradication. "Every time a new country comes on line, we have to blow our budget. It's very frustrating."

Genetic testing shows that the virus found there originated in northern Nigeria and appeared in Sudan last year. Polio, which in early 2003 was limited to just three African countries - Nigeria, Niger and Egypt, has since been found in 11 others, though it is not spreading in all of them.

Thought to be on the verge of eradication, the virus recovered in 2004 after officials of three northern Nigerian states stopped vaccinations because of rumors that the vaccine had become contaminated with the AIDS virus, or with pork products or hormones that would render Muslim women infertile.

After assurances from Muslim doctors and clerics and the purchase of new vaccine from Indonesia, immunizations resumed in those states in October. But by that time Nigerian strains had spread from Guinea on the Atlantic coast to Sudan on the Red Sea. Late last year, two cases were found in Saudi Arabia, just before the peak of the annual pilgrimage that brings two million Muslims to Mecca from all over the world.

In Ethiopia, two children - both in Tigre, a state that borders Sudan - have been paralyzed. Because only about one infected person in 200 shows symptoms, the virus must be much more widespread, experts said.

Ethiopia's health minister, Dr. Tadesse Kebede, who was in Geneva yesterday to discuss the crisis, told W.H.O. officials that he had been running extra polio campaigns in Tigre because he feared that the virus would reach that area.

One of the victims, a 2-year-old boy, had previously had four doses of oral polio vaccine; the other, a 1-year-old girl, had received two doses.

"In tropical countries, this is common - it's not like in our country, where three doses gives solid immunity," said Dr. Heymann, who is American. "If the child has diarrhea, it can just wash the vaccine virus out of the system. And there are other competing viruses that can hook on to the same receptors."

In some cases, it can take as many as 10 doses to fully immunize a child.

