12 December 2017, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh — The Government of Bangladesh, with the support of UNICEF, the World Health Organization and GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance, today launched a vaccination campaign against diphtheria and other preventable diseases for all Rohingya children aged 6 weeks to 6 years living in 12 camps and temporary settlements near the Myanmar border.

Accelerated immunization will cover nearly 255 000 children in Ukhiya and Teknaf sub-districts in Cox's Bazar, while the Government and health partners continue to increase support for diphtheria treatment and prevention.

"Diphtheria usually appears among vulnerable populations that have not received routine vaccinations, such as the Rohingyas. The outbreak shows a steep rise in cases, an indicator of the extreme vulnerability of children in the Rohingya camps and settlements. This calls for immediate action to protect them from this killer disease. Vaccination provides effective prevention," saidÂÂ Edouard Beigbeder, UNICEF Representative to Bangladesh.

Recent data from the WHO Early Warning Alert and Response System (EWARS) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) shows 722 probable diphtheria cases, including 9 deaths, in the camps and makeshift settlements hosting the refugees, between 12 November and 10 December.

"The Government of Bangladesh will do everything necessary to contain this outbreak. We thank WHO, UNICEF and other health partners for their swift response to the request of the Government to combat this diphtheria outbreak, and for continuously supporting our efforts to provide essential health services for these vulnerable people," said Dr Abul Kalam Azad, Director General of Health Services, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of Bangladesh.

The children are being administered pentavalent vaccines (which protects against diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus, Haemophilus Influenzae, and hepatitis B), pneumococcal conjugate vaccines (PCV) and bivalent oral polio vaccine. The Serum Institute of India has donated 300 000 doses of pentavalent vaccines for use in the response.

Next week, three rounds of tetanus diphtheria (Td) vaccines will be provided to Rohingya children aged 7 to 15 years, and 10 000 health and development workers in Rohingya settlements. A total of 900 000 doses of Td are arriving today in the country, for this purpose.

“We are moving quickly to control this diphtheria outbreak before it spins out of control. The vaccines will help protect every Rohingya child in these temporary settlements from falling prey to the deadly disease. Beyond vaccinations, we are helping health workers to clinically manage suspected cases, trace their contacts, and ensure sufficient supplies of medicines," said Dr Navaratnasamy Paranietharan, WHO Representative to Bangladesh.

WHO is procuring 2 000 doses of diphtheria anti-toxins to treat diphtheria patients. Nearly 345 doses were hand carried by WHO from Delhi to Cox’s Bazar.

WHO and UNICEF are working with communities to ensure that they are aware of the signs and symptoms of diphtheria, and that they can access treatment as quickly as possible.

Diphtheria is an infectious respiratory disease caused by a potent toxin produced by certain strains of the bacteriumÂÂ *Corynebacterium diphtheriae*. It spreads through air droplets by coughing or sneezing. Risk factors include crowding, poor hygiene and lack of immunization.