FREETOWN, 23 April 2015 – Despite the unprecedented challenges of delivering basic health services in an Ebola emergency, Sierra Leone will hold its first public immunization and health campaign over the next four days aiming to reach an estimated 1.5 million children under 5 with life-saving interventions.

The national Maternal and Child Health Week campaign (‘*Mami en Pikin Welbodi Week’)* – part of the World and Africa Vaccination week – aims to reach all children 6-59 months with malnutrition assessment, the vaccination of children 0-23 months that have missed or defaulted from routine immunization schedules, the administration of Vitamin A and deworming tablets, and HIV testing for pregnant women and their partners.

“Such basic cost-effective interventions save thousands of lives at the best of times, but with the Ebola outbreak fewer mothers and children have been visiting health facilities to get this free treatment,” said Dr. Abu Bakarr Fofanah, Minister of Health and Sanitation. “I want to assure parents and care givers that the exercise will be safe and appeal to them to get their children vaccinated to help reduce infant mortality in Sierra Leone.”

Sierra Leone has one of the highest rates of infant and maternal mortality in the world with a maternal mortality ratio of 1,165 per 100,000 live births and under 5 mortality at 156 per 1,000 live births.

The Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone has killed at least 3,400 people through direct infections, but it has also weakened basic and essential health services, undermining trust, and creating restrictions on regular health campaigns.

“Vaccines are life-saving and crucial in boosting children’s immune system to minimize the devastating effects of childhood diseases,” said WHO Representative in Sierra Leone, Dr Anders Nordstrom. “We are working hard to get at zero cases of Ebola, and we are now also increasing our efforts to return to normal safe health service delivery thereby reducing illness and deaths, particularly among women and children in the country”

Around 3,600 teams will deploy across the country, with more than 10,700 vaccinators and distributors going door-to-door. Subsequent campaigns planned for May and July will deliver measles and polio vaccinations, and the distribution of long-lasting impregnated bed nets.

“Because of the Ebola outbreak, we’ve had to develop unique safety protocols for the campaign in line with the Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) practice,” said UNICEF Representative in Sierra Leone, Roeland Monasch. “UNICEF has supported the distribution of 1.5 million pairs of gloves, over 3,600 hand sanitizers and 50,000 disposable aprons, as part of the campaign to protect those involve in the campaign.”

For the malnutrition screening, mothers will be guided to measure their own children with MUAC (Mid-Upper Arm Circumference) measuring tapes, which will be distributed for every individual child (1.2 million tapes). This is the first time such a mass-assessment has been carried out by mothers and is expected to instill a sustained practice for the mothers.

UNICEF is providing vaccines, syringes and other equipment, and financial support for logistics, operational and social mobilization and sensitization activities costs. The MCH Week is being organized by the Ministry of Health and Sanitation in collaboration with UNICEF, WHO, Helen Keller International, Sierra Leone Red Cross Society, the Institute of Immunization and other NGOs, and generously supported by funding from the United States (OFDA), Canada (CIDA) and European Union.