Liberia conducts first polio, measles immunizations since Ebola outbreak.

MONROVIA, May 8 – A week-long campaign to vaccinate more than 600,000 children against polio and measles kicks off today in Liberia, led by the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, and supported by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO).

The massive campaign had been scheduled for last year, but was suspended due to the Ebola outbreak.

"The interruption of Liberia's vaccination program has created an alarming immunity gap and a larger pool of susceptible children," said Dr Walter T. Gwenigale, Minister of Health, republic of Liberia. "This vaccination campaign, which will protect children against diseases that can kill or paralyze them, is a crucial step towards recovery and the restoration of health services," he added.

The campaign aims to vaccinate more than 683,000 children against polio and 603,000 against measles. The polio vaccines will be given to children aged up to 59 months, and the measles vaccine to children between the ages of six and 59 months. Children aged 12-59 months will also receive deworming medicine.

Liberia is set to be declared free of Ebola transmission on Saturday May 9, should there be no new confirmed case. But because there is still a risk of reintroduction from Guinea and Sierra Leone – where transmission continues – infection prevention measures will be heightened during the campaign, including temperature checks and the use of single-use syringes and new gloves for each child vaccinated.

A major social mobilization effort has been deployed to convince communities of the need to have their children vaccinated and to explain the measures being taken to minimize any risk of infection. Community members, including traditional and religious leaders, women's groups and local NGOs are playing a key role in promoting the campaign.

The Ebola outbreak affected all aspects of the health system, including vaccinations. Measles vaccinations, for example, dropped by 45 per cent between August and December 2014 compared with the same period in 2013, according to government figures.

Measles is a highly contagious viral disease and one of the leading causes of death among young children globally. Polio, also a highly infectious viral disease, can lead to paralysis and sometimes death, with children under the age of five the most vulnerable. Both diseases are easily preventable as vaccines are effective and inexpensive.