SANA'A, YEMEN, 16 March 2018 -- The World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF and national health authorities have completed a large-scale vaccination campaign to control the spread of diphtheria in Yemen.

The campaign targeted nearly 2.7 million children aged 6 weeks to 15 years in 11 governorates. It focused on locations reporting suspected cases of diphtheria and areas at high risk of spread of the infectious respiratory disease. More than 6000 health workers were mobilized during the campaign, including for community engagement and the administration of the vaccine.

First reported in October 2017, the outbreak has spread rapidly across the country, infecting more than 1300 people and killing over 70. Almost 80% of the caseload is children and young adults below 25 years of age.

"We are in a race against time to control this outbreak and save lives," says Dr Nevio Zagaria, WHO Representative to Yemen. "The almost collapsed health system and the conflict has severely hampered the response, but we have managed to deliver urgently needed antibiotics and diphtheria anti-toxins (DAT) to support treatment, and are now scaling up vaccination efforts to stop the outbreak from spreading even further."

The rapid spread of diphtheria in Yemen highlights major gaps in routine vaccination coverage in recent years and signifies a collapsing health system. Only 50% of all health facilities are partially or fully functioning.

In November and December 2017, WHO and UNICEF vaccinated almost 450 000 children under 7 years of age against diphtheria in Ibb – the worst affected governorate accounting for nearly 35% of all cases reported.

The vaccination campaign is part of a larger response plan to control diphtheria implemented by national health authorities, UNICEF and WHO. Parallel activities include strengthening

surveillance and case detection, enhancing laboratory testing capacity, procuring and distributing the DAT to the Diphtheria Isolation Units in health facilities, and training and deploying Rapid Response Teams to trace contacts and provide preventative antibiotics in the community. Health education and awareness campaigns are also being conducted to inform communities on how to protect themselves against diphtheria and other infectious diseases.

Diphtheria is an infectious respiratory disease caused by a potent toxin produced by certain strains of the bacterium *Corynebacterium diphtheriae*. It spreads through air droplets by coughing or sneezing. Vaccination against diphtheria is safe and effective for prevention of the disease.

http://www.emro.who.int/yem/yemen-news/diphtheria-vaccination-campaign-for-27-million-children-concludes-in-yemen.html?format=html