

Poor response to pulse polio campaign in Assam

G Vinayak in Guwahati <http://indiabroad.rediff.com/news/2002/jan/21assam.htm>

Alarmed by the poor response to the first phase of pulse polio immunisation drive held on Sunday, the Assam government has decided to undertake a special two-day door-to-door drive to administer the polio vaccine to as many children as possible.

Although 4.2 million children were targeted by the state's health department under the first phase of vaccination held across the state on Sunday, less than 50 per cent of the children turned up as parents feared a repeat of the November 11 tragedy when 23 children died soon after being administered Vitamin A drops.

According to the state director of health and family welfare, Dr SN Thakuria, only 50 per cent of the children in rural areas and about 36 per cent in the urban centres could be given the polio drops on Sunday.

"It is unfortunate, but true that many impoverished parents are apprehensive about their children's health after witnessing what happened during the Vitamin A campaign," Dr Gokul Sarma, a leading paediatrician in Guwahati, said.

Neither the UNICEF nor the Assam government accepted the responsibility for the death of 23 children in November 2001, although the Assam Human Rights Commission has indicted the state government for negligence in running the campaign and has recommended payment of compensation to the parents of the victims.

Health experts now fear that the target of eradicating polio in the country by 2003 might suffer a setback since the success of such mass campaigns depend upon wider coverage.

"Even if a couple of thousand children are left out of the drive, the wild virus may remain within the community leading to polio cases in the future," an UNICEF official said on condition of anonymity.

The door-to-door survey planned for Tuesday may increase the coverage by another 20 to 30 per cent, but that is not enough to meet the targets, health officials said.

The second round pulse polio vaccination is slated for February 14, but given the apprehensions in the minds of the people, it is unlikely that many more parents will come out in larger numbers, health officials said.