Recent figures indicate the epidemic is slowing down in Belarus, Latvia and Lithuania and stabilising in Estonia, after extensive information efforts and mass vaccination campaigns. In Ukraine, where statistics are less reassuring, a major vaccination effort is being planned, but will depend for its success on an adequate supply of vaccines. A recent ECHO contract is enabling the Federation to extend its programme into three oblasts in the Russian Federation.

The context

In June 1995, the Federation launched a combined appeal with the World Health Organisation and UNICEF calling for resources to contain, and if possible, eliminate the rapidly spreading diphtheria epidemic that is rife in all the countries of the former Soviet Union and threatening to spill over into the rest of Europe and beyond. Under the strategy drawn up by the three organisations, the Federation supports mass immunisation campaigns in Belarus, Ukraine and the three Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania by providing vaccines and other medical supplies and by encouraging social mobilisation campaigns by the National Societies in these countries.

Latest events

A mass diphtheria vaccination campaign was successfully conducted in Belarus from 13 to 31 May, reportedly vaccinating 90% of the target population (6.1 million people from 18 to 60+ years).

The Federation participated in a major meeting on diphtheria control and poliomyelitis eradication in Berlin, 2-5 June, together with WHO, UNICEF, CDC, USAID representatives, health authorities at Vice-Ministry level, infectious disease specialists and presidents of the Red Cross Societies of the 15 Newly Independent States (N.I.S.). Progress in controlling the epidemic was reviewed and future strategies discussed. In brief, in Estonia the rate of cases is stagnating. In the other two Baltic States and in Belarus cases have declined, and vaccination coverage of the target population is increasing. In Ukraine the decline in cases is slower, but mass vaccination campaigns are planned for several oblasts with high incidence rates in autumn 1996.
In June the Federation organised a mission to the three Baltic States to assess progress and the problems of the Diphtheria Control programme, to collect data and information for the Final Report to ECHO and other donors, and to evaluate epidemiological data related to vaccination coverage, areas with high incidence rates and high risk groups. The National Red Cross Societies’ involvement in the programme was discussed, as well as future plans and activities.

Preparations for a mass vaccination campaign in Ukraine are ongoing. Vaccines, syringes and needles have been ordered with Italian funds. An ECHO contract is expected by the end of August.

A contract between the Federation and ECHO has been approved and is providing cold chain equipment for the diphtheria programme and training in the three western oblasts of the Russian Federation (Leningrad, Carelia and Pskov) bordering on the Baltic States.

The contract of Dr. Rosemarie Buchegger, from the Austrian Red Cross, serving as Diphtheria Co-ordinator at the Federation Secretariat, has been extended until 30 September 1996. She was joined on 25 May for a five week period by Dr. Pamela Ching, Epidemiologist on loan from CDC, Atlanta, who compiled medical data for the final report on the operation in the Baltics.

Dr. Maurizio Muglia, Medical Co-ordinator for Belarus and Ukraine, completed his assignment in Belarus in June. From August onwards he will concentrate on support to the programme in Ukraine.

**Red Cross/Red Crescent action**

**Baltic States**

The vaccination campaigns begun in November 1995 in all three countries have not achieved the recommended national coverage rates of 90%, since targeting has prioritised the most affected geographical areas. All three are therefore continuing vaccination and considering another campaign this autumn.

All vaccines as well as other supplies have been delivered according to schedule. Vaccines donated by the Netherlands Red Cross (1,640,000 doses of Td vaccine plus syringes and needles) arrived in the Baltic States in early July.

The situation and recent developments, country by country, are as follows:

**Estonia**

- Ten cases as of 30 June 1996, or the same number of cases as in the same period in 1995. Most of the cases are in Narva and Voruma, both districts bordering the Russian Federation, and in Tallin and Tartu.

- Among adults 25-64 years of age (the target population), the national vaccination coverage is currently approximately 46.5%. Coverage in Narva is 90.3% (57% due to ECHO supported campaign in 1995/1996), and coverage in Tallin is reported to be 31.1% (24.5% as the result of a campaign in 1995/96).

- 100,000 doses of Td vaccines financed with ECHO funds have been received. The Netherlands Red Cross contributed 550,000 doses of Td vaccines and 500,000 syringes and needles.

- Social mobilisation activities were carried out by the national Red Cross Societies. Radio, television and newspapers were fully involved, as were churches and social
welfare agencies. Hostels, dormitories and other areas with high risk groups were especially targeted.

- An intensive social mobilisation campaign is about to begin, to prepare the launching of a vaccination campaign in September.

- Immunological results from the Staten Serum Institute (SSI) will be available in October.

**Latvia**

- 58 cases including one death have occurred this year up to 30 June, representing a reduction of more than 70% over the same period in 1995. In 1995, 75% of the cases occurred in high risk groups in urban areas, compared to 78% to date in 1996.

- Vaccination coverage nationally is estimated to be 35.5% (19+ years old with three doses). Vaccination coverage among high risk groups in the cities varies from 74.4% in Ludza to 20.9% in Riga City.

- ECHO funds financed 475,000 doses of Td vaccines in 1996.

- The Netherlands Red Cross contributed 510,000 doses of Td vaccines and syringes and needles.

- The Italian Government has provided major support for the Diphtheria Control programme.

- Local Red Cross groups organised comprehensive social mobilisation activities, which are still ongoing. Another campaign is to take place in September.

- Latvian and Russian language media (TV, radio, newspapers) are actively supporting vaccination campaign efforts. Information pamphlets and posters on diphtheria have been produced.

- SSI immunological survey results will be available in October.

**Lithuania**

- Six cases and no deaths occurred this year up to 30 June, representing a reduction of approximately 70% compared to the same period in 1995 (22 cases). All cases in 1996 occurred in Vilnius City and district.

- Among adults 25-60 years of age (the target population) vaccination coverage is currently approximately 75% nation-wide.

- A mass immunisation campaign started in the northern and western districts in April this year is still ongoing. The Lithuanian Red Cross planned the campaign in close collaboration with the Ministry of Health. Co-ordination committees were set up in all municipalities, led by the mayors and including various health facilities and the Red Cross. The Red Cross produced leaflets, posters and vaccination certificates. TV and radio provided excellent campaign coverage.

- The Federation has provided 775,000 doses of Td Vaccines in 1996.

- The Netherlands Red Cross contributed 580,000 doses of Td vaccines.
- SSI immunological survey results will be available in October.

**Belarus**

- 86 cases have occurred this year up to 30 June, a reduction of approximately 40% compared to the same period in 1995 (140 cases). Most of the cases occurred in the 5-19 years age-group and in the 30-49 years age-group. The highest incidence rate was in Vitebsk (1.53) and in Minsk City (0.95).

The Ministry of Health organised a mass vaccination campaign, in all oblasts, with a special focus on vulnerable groups. All adults (18+ years) were to receive one dose of Td vaccine irrespective of previous immunisation history (target population of 6.1 million people). Originally scheduled to run from 13 to 23 May 1996, the campaign was prolonged until 31 May because of the late arrival of vaccines donated by the Netherlands Red Cross and the Federation. Several health seminars were held in Minsk and the oblasts to prepare for the campaign and information was distributed through media, posters and printed material. According to the MoH, 5.5 million people were vaccinated, or 90% of the target population. There was a special focus on the so-called vulnerable groups: unemployed, homeless, alcoholics, gypsies.

- The Belarus Red Cross Society was very active in social mobilisation, using press, TV, radio and leaflets. Information/training sessions were organised for health and medical personnel. Mop-up activities were conducted in June/July.

- The Federation provided 3,000,000 doses of Td vaccines, cold chain supply and technical assistance (seminars, social mobilisation).

- The Netherlands Red Cross Society contributed 1,786,000 doses of Td vaccines and syringes and needles.

**Ukraine**

In Ukraine the diphtheria epidemic is still ongoing. According to the Ministry of Health, the epidemic this year, up to 30 June, has affected 1,622 persons, 267 of them children. The cities of Kyiv and Sevastopol have the highest incidence. Data indicate that many people in high risk groups remain unimmunised, presenting the most urgent challenge for the campaigns in 1996.

During May and June, an American-based body, PATH, (Programme of Appropriate Technology in Health), conducted mass vaccination campaigns in three oblasts (Lugansk, Dnipropetrovsk and Donetsk), reporting a high coverage rate. However, this leaves 17 oblasts where vaccination should take place in 1996. Containment measures will depend on whether the vaccine requirements of 15.3 million doses are met.

- The Netherlands Red Cross donated 3 million doses of Td vaccines and the same amount of syringes and needles, which have been distributed to the oblasts.

- Using funds from the Italian Government, 1,890,000 doses of Td vaccines have been ordered for delivery in September and more than 4.85 million syringes and needles will be purchased.

- The Federation has submitted a funding application to ECHO for further financial assistance. A decision is expected end August.

**Russian Federation**

A contract between ECHO and the Federation was signed in May, enabling the Federation to provide cold chain equipment and training for the diphtheria vaccination
programme to the three western oblasts of the Russian Federation (Leningrad, Karelia and Pskov Oblasts). The purchase of cold chain equipment is under way. Most is being purchased locally.

Pskov Oblast will start with a mass vaccination campaign on 15 September, after training seminars for Red Cross staff and health personnel, and a seminar on cold chain use, scheduled for 2-6 September.

**Outstanding needs**

The major outstanding issue, once the ECHO contract for Ukraine is finalised, will be to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Health and the Ukraine Red Cross, to draw up a Plan of Action and to plan the mass vaccination campaign in autumn for selected oblasts.

**External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media**

The Federation will continue to participate in all international co-ordination meetings throughout 1996 and will work in close collaboration with the Interagency Immunisation Co-ordinating Committee (IICC) in Copenhagen and with all concerned governments and ministries.

A meeting of all partners in the programme will be held in Tallin, Estonia, from 23 to 24 September, to evaluate the programme in the Baltic States and look at future moves.

**Contributions**

See Annex 1 for details.

**Conclusion**

This complex operation is now well under way in the Baltic States and in Belarus. A start is scheduled to be made in Ukraine and in the three Oblasts of the Russian Federation in the near future.

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