

Pakistan Taliban kill police polio escort as vaccination drive starts

AFP – The Pakistani Taliban claimed the killing of a police officer as he travelled Monday to guard polio vaccinators on the first day of a nationwide immunisation effort after a year of rising cases.

The officer was travelling to guard polio vaccinators in the area of Jamrud town in northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province when he was killed, local police official Zarmat Khan told AFP.

“Two motorcycle riders opened fire on him,” he said. “The constable died instantly at the scene.”

Pakistan and neighbouring Afghanistan are the only countries where polio is endemic and militants have for decades targeted vaccination teams and their security escorts.

The Pakistani Taliban in a statement claimed responsibility for the “targeted attack” and said militants also “seized” the slain officer’s weapon.

Pakistan reported at least 73 polio infections in 2024, compared to just six cases in 2023. The vaccination campaign which started on Monday is the first of the year and is due to last a week.

“Despite the incident, the polio vaccination drive in the area remains ongoing,” Khan said.

Abdul Hameed Afridi, another senior police official in the area, also confirmed details of the attack and said officers have “launched an investigation”.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif acknowledged the violence in a

statement from his office, saying “the anti-polio campaign will continue with full vigour”.

Polio can easily be prevented by the oral administration of a few drops of vaccine, but scores of vaccination workers and their escorts have been killed over the years.

In the past, clerics falsely claimed that the vaccine contained pork or alcohol, declaring it forbidden for Muslims.

In more recent years the attacks have focused on vulnerable police escorts accompanying the vaccinators as they go door-to-door.

Last year, dozens of Pakistani policemen who accompany medical teams on campaigns went on strike after a string of militant attacks targeting them.

Pakistan has witnessed rising militant attacks since the Taliban returned to power in neighbouring Afghanistan.

More than 1,600 people were killed in 2024 – the deadliest year in almost a decade – according to the Center for Research and Security Studies, an Islamabad-based analysis group.

Islamabad accuses Kabul’s new rulers of failing to rout militants organising on Afghan soil, a charge the Taliban government routinely denies.

In November, at least seven people – including five children – were killed in a bombing targeting police gathered to guard vaccinators near a school in southwestern Balochistan province.

Balochistan – which also neighbours Afghanistan – was the area with the largest number of polio cases in 2024, despite being the most sparsely populated.

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