

ROGER F. WICKER

MISSISSIPPI

ARMED SERVICES

COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION

ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS

RULES AND ADMINISTRATION

COMMISSION ON SECURITY
AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

SUITE 555

DIRKSEN SENATE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

(202) 224-6253

www.wicker.senate.gov

June 17, 2021

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden,

As a U.S. Senator committed to the eradication of polio, I am writing to express my concern over the recent attacks on polio health workers in Afghanistan. I am particularly troubled by the increasing frequency of these attacks since the announcement of the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021.

On June 14, multiple coordinated attacks were carried out against polio workers in eastern Afghanistan, resulting in five deaths and four critical injuries.¹ These deadly attacks follow an attack in March in which three female polio workers were murdered in Afghanistan. As of today, no group has claimed responsibility for any of these attacks, yet we know the Taliban and Islamic State often interrupt door-to-door vaccination campaigns in their controlled territories.

The Taliban and other Islamist extremist groups wield tremendous influence over the health of women and children in Afghanistan. Before the U.S. invasion, the Taliban stripped women and children of their basic human rights in order to ensure they would not develop the skills to thrive in a modern society.² After the collapse of Taliban rule in 2001, the new Afghan Ministry of Public Health, backed by funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development, launched a comprehensive public health program called the Basic Package of Health Services. This program proved highly successful in improving the health outcomes of Afghan women and children. Yet the threat to these individuals is resurfacing, as many experts suggest the Taliban is now stronger than it has been in recent memory.³ The Taliban's return to political power poses a serious threat to the progress that has been made against wild polio.

Polio is a crippling and potentially fatal infectious disease. There is no cure, but there are safe and effective vaccines. The strategy to eradicate polio is based on preventing infection by immunizing every child until transmission stops and the world is polio-free. Afghanistan and

¹ Nizamuddin, "UN Condemns Attacks on Polio Workers in Nangarhar." *Pajhwok*, June 14, 2021, <https://pajhwok.com/2021/06/15/un-condemns-attacks-against-polio-workers-in-nangarhar/>.

² International Federation for Human Rights, "Afghan women under Taliban repression," December 15, 2021, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/482c5be4c.html>


³ Lindsay Maizland, "The Taliban in Afghanistan," *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 15, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/taliban-afghanistan>

Pakistan are now the only two countries that still have transmission of wild polio. The Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI), one of the largest, most successful public-private health initiatives ever undertaken, has immunized more than three billion children and spared 18 million children from disability since its founding in 1988.

The COVID-19 pandemic placed heavy strains on GPEI and its work against polio, forcing several vaccination campaigns to be paused. The recent attacks on polio workers have forced additional pauses, and it is now estimated that over three million children in Afghanistan will miss vaccination this year.⁴ Because of these concerns, I ask that you consider the safety and protection of frontline polio workers as U.S. troops withdraw from Afghanistan, as well as implications for the United States should the security situation in Afghanistan lead to a global resurgence of polio.

I look forward to continuing to work with you to ensure the safety of children and frontline health care workers in Afghanistan.

Sincerely,



Roger F. Wicker
United States Senator

⁴ World Health Organization, "Third national polio immunization campaign begins in Afghanistan," June 14, 2021, <http://www.emro.who.int/afg/afghanistan-news/third-national-polio-immunization-campaign-begins-in-afghanistan.html>.