



## Polio: How Rotary negotiated with the Taliban in Pakistan

<https://www.rotarygbi.org/how-rotary-negotiated-with-the-taliban-in-pakistan/?fbclid=IwAR3ID56YXDUQXmyZxKYuCZaIMHdGiaN7vvhiq-xyBCj9MO96tnB4c-P0Ow>

*There are just three areas of the world where poliovirus is present. One of them is on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan where Rotary is dealing direct with the Taliban to help eradicate the disease.*

By **Dave King**

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**T**he President of Rotary International has saluted the efforts of a Rotary member who persuaded the Taliban to lay down their arms to allow for polio immunisation of young children in Pakistan.

Barry Rassin praised the bravery of Aziz Memon from Rotary's Pakistan PolioPlus committee, who negotiated with the armed group to allow the immunisations to go ahead.

Speaking at the 'Be The Inspiration' weekend organised by the Rotary Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon, the Bahamas-based President said that it was because of Rotary that the world is now so close to eradicating polio.

There still remain pockets of the wild poliovirus, notably in Nigeria, and along the border with Pakistan and Afghanistan, which remains one of the most politically sensitive areas in the world, controlled by Taliban fighters.

"I want to be proud that Pakistan has had eight cases this year, but it wasn't the case a few years ago where they had many more," explained Barry.



“Aziz Memon decided he was tired of what was going on in his country. Aziz said the Taliban were causing this problem and he wanted to meet them.

“The Taliban came and got him, put a hood over his head, put him in a car and took him away.

“This was a Rotary member who never knew if he would see his family again.

“They took him to a house, put him in a room and they started asking him questions.

“The leader wanted to know who he was, why did he want to meet us. He explained what Rotary is – we are non-political, non-religious, we just want to save your children.

“They said okay, we are going to lay our arms down for a day so that you can immunise all our children.

“This is a Rotarian who got the Taliban to stop shooting at us.”

## **We made a promise and we will finish the job.**

In Afghanistan, officials have registered 19 cases of polio so far this year, up from 13 and 14 for the last two years, according to World Health Organization figures.

Afghanistan, Pakistan and Nigeria remain the only three countries regarded as endemic.

“We have heard when there were 500,000 cases wayback, 350,000 in 1985, and now 27 this year – unfortunately more than last year, but we are going to get there,” added the RI President.

“It is just along the border with Pakistan and Afghanistan, and we are committed.”

“In Nigeria, Rotary members are making similar efforts to reach the north-east of the African state which is dominated by Boko Haram rebels, and this is having success,” said Barry.

“The military are doing the immunisations. They are immunising all of the children because of the conflict, and that is because of Rotary,” he explained.



“They are going to immunise every child, despite the Boko Haram.”

And in Sri Lanka, members have been working with the Tamils following the conflict which ended nine years ago to ensure the medicine reaches those in need.

“It is Rotarians around the world who are changing the world,” Barry Rassin told members in Stratford-upon-Avon.

“Each and every one of you needs to know that we must stand proud and tell our communities who we are and what we do, because we will eradicate polio.

“There is no question.

“Yes there is frustration, yes there is donor fatigue, yes we wish this was done a long time ago, but we made a promise and we will finish the job.

“We know it is going to take at least three years after the last case to ensure the wild poliovirus has gone.

“The wild poliovirus has to be eliminated completely and we will do this.”

The three-day Rotary Institute was staged at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Stratford-upon-Avon.

There was a day focused on The Rotary Foundation staged on Friday, followed by two days of presentations focusing on different aspects of Rotary’s work as part of the **‘Be the Inspiration’** weekend.