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NEWS RELEASE

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Rotary clubs increase awareness, advocacy work for World Polio Day on Oct. 24

'World's Biggest Commercial,' 'End Polio Now' album highlight public outreach; Sir Emeka Offor sets example for Nigeria's private sector with a major gift to Rotary's PolioPlus program

EVANSTON, Ill., USA (Oct. 18, 2012) – On World Polio Day (Oct. 24), Rotary International invites one and all to get online and participate in the World's Biggest Commercial, promoting the global effort to eradicate this crippling childhood disease.

In Nigeria, one of the remaining polio-endemic countries, an early participant in the World's Biggest Commercial is expected to be business leader and philanthropist Sir Emeka Offor, who in the lead-up to World Polio Day announced a gift of US\$250,000 to Rotary's PolioPlus program, which provides funding for the [Global Polio Eradication Initiative](#) (GPEI).

"It is unacceptable that polio continues to infect our children and cause such suffering in Nigeria," said Offor, executive vice chairman of the oil and gas service conglomerate Chrome Group and founder of the Sir Emeka Offor Foundation. "I hope that my gift to PolioPlus will inspire other donors to step up, so that we can eliminate this terrible – yet readily preventable -- disease forever."

Offor's quarter million-dollar contribution to polio eradication follows his gift in the same amount to Rotary's global peace studies program in early October.

The innovative, interactive World's Biggest Commercial campaign gives everyone a chance to join Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Bill Gates, Jackie Chan, Amanda Peet, and other world figures and celebrities already participating in Rotary's "This Close" campaign (as in, "this close" to ending polio) in raising awareness and support for polio eradication.

Participants can upload photos of themselves and comments to Rotary's polio eradication website, endpolionow.org, to be edited into the constantly expanding promotional spot. Participants will receive an email with a direct link to their image and comment within the commercial.

Also on World Polio Day, Rotary will make available for purchase "End Polio Now," an eclectic album of songs performed by its celebrity polio eradication ambassadors from the music industry, including polio survivors Itzhak Perlman (classical violin); Donovan (folk rock); and Staff Benda Bilili (Congolese soukous). The album will be available via iTunes and at shop.rotary.org.

But beneath the entertaining nature of the online and music projects lies a very serious issue adding gravity to World Polio Day 2012. A US\$700-million funding gap threatens to undermine all of the progress achieved against the disease since 1988, when the World Health Organization, UNICEF and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention joined Rotary to launch the GPEI.

In response to the crisis, Rotary on Sept. 27 announced a funding commitment of \$75 million for polio eradication over the next three years during a special United Nations General Assembly session on polio convened by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. Rotary also delivered to the UN an online petition supporting polio eradication signed by more than 7,000 global citizens.

Also announced at the UN was a fundraising collaboration between the government of Canada, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Rotary clubs throughout Canada calling for the government and the Gates Foundation each to match dollar-for-dollar up to C\$1 million raised by Canadian Rotary clubs through their ongoing Pennies and More for Polio initiative. The arrangement follows Rotary's August letter-writing campaign urging members of Parliament to increase Canada's support for polio eradication.

To date, Rotary members have contributed nearly \$1.2 billion to the effort. Coinciding with World Polio Day, Rotary is ramping up its advocacy work in the 200 countries and regions where Rotary clubs exist to encourage every national government to commit to the funding levels needed to close the gap.

The irony is that despite the funding gap, there has never been a more opportune time to finish off polio, with new cases at an all-time low and the wild poliovirus now confined to only a few pockets in Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Pakistan. In 1988, polio infected and disabled about 350,000 people a year, most of them children. In 2011, fewer than 700 cases were reported – a reduction of more than 99 percent. The success is due to mass immunization drives that have reached more than two billion children with the oral polio vaccine.

But public health experts say that if the eradication effort stalls now, polio could rebound quickly, potentially paralyzing 250,000 children a year. Unvaccinated children everywhere, including countries now polio-free, would be at greatly increased risk.

World Polio Day follows a succession of significant developments that have made 2012 one of the most important years in the history of the polio eradication initiative.

- In January, Rotary announced it had raised more than the \$200 million in new money for polio eradication called for in a \$355 million challenge grant from the Gates Foundation. The total is now \$228 million and growing. In recognition of Rotary's effort, the Gates Foundation added another \$50 million. Total funding package: \$605+ million.
- In February, India was removed from the list of polio-endemic countries. Many health experts expected India to be polio's final stronghold, so the country's polio-free designation after a full year of no new cases represents a major milestone.
- In May, the World Health Assembly declared polio eradication to be a "programmatic emergency for global public health," in recognition of the dichotomy posed by the increased risk of failure due to the funding gap, opposite the significant progress represented by the reduction in cases and polio's shrinking geographical presence.

The message to world leaders is clear: support the final push to achieve eradication now while the goal has never been closer, or face the potential consequences of a new polio pandemic that could disable millions of children within a decade.

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Editor's note: [Rotary](#) is a global humanitarian organization with more than 1.2 million members in 34,000 Rotary clubs in over 200 countries and geographical areas. Rotary members are men and women who are business, professional and community leaders with a shared commitment to make the world a better place through humanitarian service. For more information and images for download please visit Rotary's [Media Center](#).