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Measles and Rubella in WHO SEAR

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Why in News

Recently, the Maldives and Sri Lanka have become the first two countries in the **World Health Organisation's South-East Asian Region** (WHO SEAR) to have eliminated both measles and rubella ahead of the 2023 deadline.

In September 2019, member countries of WHO SEAR **set 2023 as the target** for the elimination of measles and rubella.

Key Points

- The announcement came after the 5th meeting of the **SEAR Verification Commission for Measles and Rubella Elimination**.
 - The Commission comprises **11 independent international experts** in the fields of epidemiology, virology and public health.
 - **Bhutan, DPR Korea and Timor-Leste** are countries in the region which have **eliminated measles**.
 - **Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Timor-Leste** have **controlled Rubella**.
- **Criteria:**

A country is verified as having eliminated measles and rubella when there is no evidence of endemic transmission of the respective viruses for over three years in the presence of a well-performing surveillance system.

 - The Maldives reported its last endemic case of measles in 2009 and of rubella in October 2015.
 - Sri Lanka reported the last endemic case of measles in May 2016 and of rubella in March 2017.

- **Steps Taken:**
 - All countries in the region **introduced two doses of measles-containing vaccine** and **at least one dose of rubella-containing vaccine** in their routine immunisation programme.
 - Since 2017, nearly **500 million additional children have been vaccinated** with measles and rubella-containing vaccines.
 - **Surveillance** for measles and rubella has been **strengthened further**.
- The announcement comes amidst the **Covid-19 pandemic** and the success demonstrates the importance of joint efforts.
 - Globally, more than half of all countries **reported moderate-to-severe disruptions** or a **total suspension of vaccination** services in March and April.
 - Regionally, **both immunisation coverage and surveillance were impacted**.
 - However, SEAR countries made **coordinated efforts to resume immunisation and surveillance** activities.

Measles

- It is a **highly contagious viral disease** and is a cause of death among young children globally.
- It is particularly **dangerous for children** from the economically weaker background, as it **attacks malnourished children and those with reduced immunity**.
- It can cause **serious complications**, including **blindness, encephalitis, severe diarrhoea, ear infection and pneumonia**.

Rubella

- It is also called **German Measles**.
- Rubella is a **contagious, generally mild viral infection** that occurs most often in **children and young adults**.
- Rubella infection in **pregnant women may cause death or congenital defects** known as **Congenital Rubella Syndrome (CRS)** which causes irreversible birth defects.

Measures and Vaccinations

- The **Measles and Rubella Initiative** is a global program which aims at eliminating both these diseases.
- The **vaccine** for the diseases are provided in the form of **measles-rubella (MR)**, **measles-mumps-rubella (MMR)** or **measles-mumps-rubella-varicella (MMRV)** combination.

India and Measles

- **Incidence:**
 - Despite the availability of a safe and effective vaccine since the 1960s, both measles and rubella are **major public health concerns** in India.
 - More than 1.3 million children acquire **measles infection** and around 49000 infected children die each year, contributing nearly 36% to the global figures.
 - **Rubella infection** in pregnant women may cause fetal death or congenital defects. It leads to the development of birth defects in almost 40,000 children annually in the country.
- **Government Initiatives:**
 - **Measles-Rubella Vaccination**
 - The **Ministry of Health and Family Welfare** launched the MR Vaccination program in 2017.
 - The MR campaign **targets around 41 crore children** across the country, the largest ever in any campaign.
 - All **children aged between 9 months and less than 15 years** are given a single shot of MR vaccination irrespective of their previous measles/rubella vaccination status or measles/rubella disease status.
 - MR vaccines are **provided free-of-cost** across the states.
 - Other Initiatives include **Universal Immunization Programme (UIP), Mission Indradhanush and Intensified Mission Indradhanush.**

Source: BL