



MINISTRY OF HEALTH

## PRESS STATEMENT

### **Uganda Interrupts the Transmission of River blindness (Onchocerciasis) in the Wambabya-Rwamarongo and Kashoya-Kitomi foci; Targets Nationwide Elimination**

**8<sup>th</sup> August 2013**

Uganda has moved closer to its goal of eliminating onchocerciasis (river blindness) nationwide by 2020. The sixth Uganda Onchocerciasis Elimination Expert Advisory Committee (UOEEAC), a team composed of national and international experts has today (8<sup>th</sup> August 2013) recommended stopping ivermectin treatment for river blindness (onchocerciasis) in 2 more foci namely: Wambabya-Rwamarongo (Hoima District) and Kashoya–Kitomi (Buhweju, Kamwenge, Ibanda and Rubirizi districts). However, the latter pends satisfactory completion of confirmatory laboratory tests currently underway.

The recommendation to stop ivermectin treatment for onchocerciasis will be sent to the National Certification Committee (NCC) of the Ministry of Health seeking for approval before Post Treatment Surveillance (PTS). With NCC approval, treatment with ivermectin (Mectizan®, donated by the US Company Merck) would be discontinued in the approved areas in the year 2014. That means transmission will have been eliminated in 8 foci of river blindness in Uganda. Including the newly announced areas, more than 1,524,568 Ugandans are now no longer at risk of getting the disease. The health workers will raise awareness in the previously affected communities about why ivermectin for onchocerciasis is no longer needed prior to stopping treatment.

Onchocerciasis is a parasitic disease that is caused by the filarial nematode *Onchocerca volvulus*, which is transmitted by the bites of female black flies that breed in fast flowing rivers. The disease at its peak affected 35 districts in Uganda with 3.5 million people at risk. It is a Neglected Tropical Disease and can cause severe itching, skin lesions, eyesight impairment, and eventually if not treated can lead to permanent blindness.

This latest achievement continues to demonstrate that onchocerciasis elimination is possible in Africa. It follows announcements made in February and December 2012 highlighting the first six Ugandan foci to have stopped transmission of the disease. This success also means that about 3,000,000 ivermectin treatments and more than 8,000, 000 tablets will not be needed for these foci, and they can begin a three

year post-treatment surveillance period that is required before an area can be considered officially free of the onchocerciasis. Since President of the Republic of Uganda His Excellency Yoweri Kaguta Museveni launched nationwide onchocerciasis elimination strategy in Uganda with The Carter Center as a key partner in 2007, interruption of transmission has been achieved in 8 of the 18 originally endemic-foci. The Carter Center has assisted the Uganda River Blindness Program since 1996 providing training, technical and financial support, and to establish a molecular laboratory, where essential tests are performed to verify interruption of river blindness transmission. This success story has been through the effort of the Ministry of Health's Onchocerciasis Elimination Program with support of the implementing partners including: The Carter Center, River Blindness Foundation, WHO/African Program for Onchocerciasis Control (APOC), GIZ, Sightsavers, The Lions Clubs International Foundation, Merck Co. Inc., and RTI/ENVISION. We also acknowledge the support of the District Local Governments; the district onchocerciasis coordinators, supervisors at all levels, and community medicine distributors; and the communities for their support and cooperation that allowed this to be achieved.

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