



The Republic of Uganda

# MINISTRY OF HEALTH

## PRESS RELEASE

### UGANDA IS NEARING THE LAST MILE IN ELIMINATING ONCHOCERCIASIS (RIVER BLINDNESS) IN AFRICA.

*The Ministry of Health has declared the Nyagak-Bondo focus (Arua, Madi-Okollo, Nebbi, and Zombo districts) as free of river blindness transmission and stops treatment for 1,121,520 people in the seven southern districts and one city in the Madi Mid-North focus (Amuru, Gulu, Omoro, Nwoya, Lira, Oyam, Pader, and Gulu City).*

The 16<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Uganda Onchocerciasis Elimination Expert Advisory Committee (UOEAC) of the Ministry of Health, held from 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> August 2023 at the Sheraton Hotel, Kampala concluded that another river blindness-endemic focus had met the World Health Organization's (WHO) criteria for eliminating river blindness transmission following three years of active surveillance for infection after halting ivermectin mass treatment.

The Nyagak-Bondo focus, with a population of 649,137, joins the other 14 foci that previously eliminated disease transmission in Uganda, bringing the total foci to 15. These foci and their respective districts include Itwara (Kyenjojo and Kabarole); Elgon (Mbale, Sironko, Manafwa, Namisindwa, and Bududa); Mpamba-Nkusi (Kagadi); Wambabya-Rwamarongo (Hoima and Kikuube); Kashoya-Kitomi (Kitagwenda, Rubirizi, Buhweju, and Ibanda); Imaramagambo (Bushenyi and Mitooma); Obongi (Obongi); Wadelai (Pakwach), West Nile (Koboko and Yumbe), Nyamugasani (Kasese); Budongo (Masindi, Hoima and Buliisa); Bwindi (Rubanda, Kanungu and Kisoro), and Victoria Nile (Jinja, Mukono, Kamuli, Mayuge and Kayunga). As of August 2023, it is estimated that **6,149,559** people are no longer at risk of onchocerciasis, including **2,973,963** living in the Victoria Nile focus.

In addition to the 15 foci where elimination has been confirmed, the seven districts and one city in the southern part of the Madi Mid-North focus, now titled 'Lower Madi Mid-North', have been reclassified as transmission interrupted. These areas will stop interventions for 1,121,520 people in 2023 and begin three years of post-treatment surveillance per the World Health Organization guidelines. This represents the single largest halt of mass treatment for river blindness in Uganda. Of the 17 foci, river blindness transmission elimination and interruption have been attained in 15 foci and the Lower Madi Mid-North, resulting in 7,271,079 Ugandans no longer receiving ivermectin treatments.



Delegates pose for a photo with the Hon. Minister of Health; the Committee Chair, committee members and representatives from The Carter Center Atlanta - USA and Country office; USAID's Act to End NTDs/East Program, RTI International; WHO; Lions Club International; Republic of South Sudan; Democratic Republic of Congo; Republic of Kenya; Ministry of Health officials and selected districts

The Lhubiriha (Kasese) focus, and the five districts of Madi Mid-North (Lamwo, Kitgum, Adjumani, Moyo, and a section of Amuru), now titled Upper Madi Mid-North, with a population of 697,032 remains classified as "interruption suspected" and will continue with interventions until the criteria to stop treatment are met.

The Government of Uganda launched the national onchocerciasis elimination policy in 2007, with complementary vector control and bi-annual mass treatment of affected communities with ivermectin (Mectizan® - donated by Merck & Co., Inc.) as part of the interventions.

River blindness is a devastating public health problem that

previously affected about 4.9 million people in 43 districts of Uganda, excluding districts in the Victoria Nile focus, which was eliminated in the early 1970s. The disease is transmitted by black flies that breed in fast-flowing rivers. It causes severe eye and skin diseases that may result in blindness. A river blindness transmission focus is a geographical area with the same transmission source, which can be a small portion of a district or one or more districts.

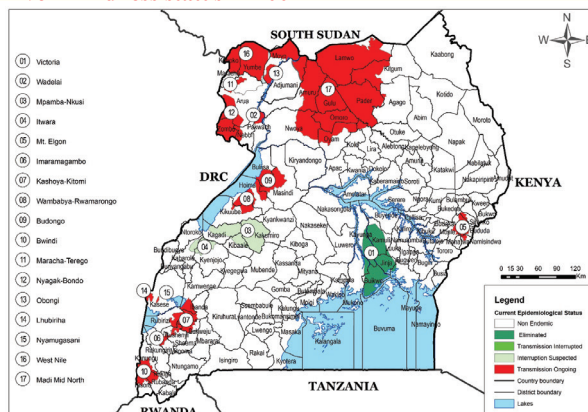
In cooperation with neighboring countries Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Republic of South Sudan (RSS), the Government of Uganda continues to promote cross-border river blindness activities. The Ministry of Health, in collaboration with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), and host districts, began mass treatment of refugees from endemic areas settled in Lamwo (Palabek) and Obongi (Palorinya) since October 2021.

Uganda continues to register success in the fight against river blindness through the effort of the Ministry of Health's National Onchocerciasis Elimination Program and with the support of partners, including The Carter Center; USAID's Act to End NTDs | East project led by RTI International; Sightsavers; UKAid, The ELMA Foundation; Lions Clubs International Foundation; Lions of Uganda; Merck & Co. Inc.; the Mectizan Donation Program; BASF; the World Health Organization; and the governments of the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of South Sudan.

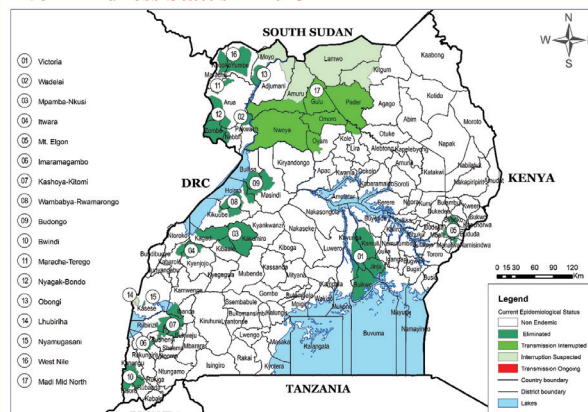
**FOR GOD AND MY COUNTRY**

*Dr. Aceng J. Ruth Otero*  
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Minister of Health

**River Blindness status in 2007**



**River Blindness Status in 2023**



**Blindness Elimination Milestone**

