**Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
Ministry of Health**

<u>**Press Release**</u>

River Blindness Transmission Interrupted in cross border Metema Focus, Amhara Regional State, Ethiopia

Onchocerciasis is one of the neglected tropical diseases targeted for elimination in 2020. It is caused by a parasitic worm that causes skin disease and visual loss and transmitted from person to person through the bites of infected black flies. In Ethiopia, Onchocerciasis is endemic in five regions which include Amhara, South nations and nationalities and peoples, Gambella, Oromia and Benishangul Gumuz. The total districts known to be endemic for Onchocerciasis were 197 and more than 19 million people at risk for the infection. Of these districts Metema focus was known to be endemic in 2000/2001 based on rapid epidemiological mapping of Onchocerciasis (REMO). These includes entire parts of West Armachiho, Tegede, Chilga and GendaWuha and larger parts of Quara and Alefa districts. Following this, all these districts including GendaWuha town administration have received biannual ivermectin MDA up to April 2017. The treatment coverage has been increased from 80% to >90% in all endemic districts between 2012 and 2017 due to shift in policy from control to elimination, twice a year treatment and the introduction of the health development army(HDA).

Five years after the policy change from river blindness control to elimination, the Ministry of Health would like to announce the interruption of transmission in the Metema river blindness focus in Amhara Regional State. The Metema focus includes Alefa, Quarra, Chilga, Takusa, Tach Armachiho, and West Armachiho districts. Beginning in 2018 over 1.1 million people in these districts will no longer need to take MDA.

The six districts in Metema focus will be first of Ethiopia's 197 river blindness endemic districts to interrupt transmission of the disease and one of the largest river blindness successes ever announced.

The Ministry of Health notes that there is one small area along the Wudi Gemzu River in Metema where black flies may still be transmitting the parasite among a population of about 15,255 people. MDA with Mectizan will continue in this 'hot spot' until transmission is interrupted.

The Metema focus crosses the international border into Sudan's Galabat focus, where transmission has also been recently interrupted. Sudan's Galabat focus will also stop MDA in 2018 and move to the PTS, in a coordinated fashion with the Ethiopian Metema focus. This is the first time two countries have coordinated their stop MDA decisions together and it exemplifies the importance of partnership between neighboring countries when disease elimination is the shared goal.

Post treatment surveillance and health education activities will continue for 3-5 years in the areas where stop MDA has been decided in order to ensure that Onchocerciasis elimination has been achieved. During the surveillance period, if there is no any evidence for recrudescence of the disease into this area, it will be declared that Onchocerciasis elimination has been achieved from Metema Focus. With this over one million people become free from the disease

This breakthrough in Metema could not have been achieved without dedicated health workers, enthusiastic affected community members supported by government's nationwide policy on river blindness elimination. The Government of Ethiopia would like to thank its Amhara partners namely: The Carter Center/Lions Clubs International Foundation (LCIF), the Ethiopia Lions Clubs, the University of South Florida, and the African Program for Onchocerciasis Control (APOC). Special gratitude goes to EOEEAC members for their advisory role and Merck, Merck Sharp & Dohme and Mectizan Donation Program for generous donation of Mectizan throughout all those years.

Congratulations to all!!!

Contact:

- Biruck Kebede - Ethiopian Federal Ministry of Health Disease prevention and control T/Director (biruck1@gmail.com)
- Nebiyu Negussu – Ethiopian Federal Ministry of Health NTD Case Team Leader (nebiyu_negussu@yahoo.com)

Federal Ministry of Health

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia