Philippines ‘prepared for worst’ in dengue vaccine concerns

MANILA, Dec 2, (AFP): The Philippines is prepared for a “worst-case scenario” following warnings that an anti-dengue vaccine administered to thousands of children may worsen the disease in some cases, a health official said Saturday.

Department of Health spokesman Eric Tayag said the country had already taken precautions against potential mishaps when it became the first country to use the landmark vaccine in 2016.

The developer of the world’s first vaccine for the potentially deadly virus, French pharmaceutical giant Sanofi, revealed earlier this week that it could trigger worse symptoms in people who had not previously been infected with dengue.

More than 733,000 children have already received Dengvaxia, raising fears that many could develop the harsher form of the disease, Tayag said.

Tayag said the Department of Health (DOH) is prepared for a worst-case scenario, claiming the country had been careful to only implement the scheme in areas where dengue is already widespread and had only given it to children aged nine or older.

"For the first two years of exposure, we have already been monitoring adverse reactions and no unusual patterns have been found," Tayag said.

The WHO had previously reassured parents that the vaccine was effective in preventing dengue in children who had been previously infected.

More than 1,000 people in the Philippines died from dengue last year, out of more than 211,000 suspected cases, according to the government.

In the light of this new analysis, the DOH (Department of Health) will place the dengue vaccination programme on hold while review and consultation is ongoing with experts, key stakeholders, and the WHO (World Health Organization), Health Secretary Francisco Duque said.

Despite the suspension, Duque said “vaccination is essential to the integrated approach in dengue prevention and control.”

Twenty-two people have died of suspected diphtheria in conflict-ravaged Yemen, the World Health Organization said Friday, warning that a port and airport blockade had created a dire shortage of vaccines.

The UN health agency said it had so far registered 197 suspected cases of diphtheria, a highly contagious and sometimes deadly infection that mostly affects the nose and throat, across Yemen.

The Saudi-led coalition battling Iran-backed Houthi rebels has now partially lifted the blockade it imposed on Yemen last month in response to a missile fired by the Houthis that was intercepted near Riyadh airport.