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Niger becomes the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to eliminate the transmission of onchocerciasis

DECATUR, Ga., Jan. 30, 2025 (GLOBE NEWSWIRE) -- On 30 January 2025, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that Niger has been verified for eliminating the transmission of onchocerciasis, commonly known as river blindness.

The Mectizan Donation Program and Merck, known as MSD outside of the U.S. and Canada, congratulate the government, and the people of Niger, on this remarkable achievement. Millions of people will no longer suffer from the debilitating visual impairment and severe itching caused by river blindness.

River blindness is a parasitic disease transmitted through the bites of a black fly that breeds near fast-flowing rivers. According to WHO, river blindness is endemic in 34 countries worldwide, of which 31 are in Africa. At least 250 million people remain at risk of infection.

In 1987, Merck made the landmark decision to donate one of its medicines, ivermectin (Mectizan®), to control river blindness in Africa and eliminate the transmission of the disease in the Americas. Since then, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Mexico have been verified by WHO as having eliminated transmission of river blindness.

Administered once or twice yearly, Mectizan has helped to control river blindness in Africa. Visual impairment, blindness, and severe itching have become exceptionally rare. Niger is now the first country on the continent to eliminate the transmission of the disease, an incredible milestone that was reached through vector control and annual mass distribution of Mectizan with sustained high treatment coverage.

"We are thrilled to learn that Niger has eliminated the transmission of river blindness," said Dr. Allison Goldberg, president of the Merck Foundation. "We celebrate this important accomplishment with the government and people of Niger, WHO, and the non-governmental organizations and donor community that helped make it possible. Merck is proud to deliver on our commitment to provide as much Mectizan as needed, for as long as needed. In doing so, we are improving the lives of individuals, families, communities, and health systems around the world."

Dr. Yao Sodahlon, director of the Mectizan Donation Program, stated, "Niger has proven that what was once thought impossible is possible. Mectizan was donated to control river blindness 37 years ago. Today, we know that elimination of transmission is possible, which will permanently end the suffering caused by the disease in Africa. We applaud the commitment of the government of Niger and the supporting partners, as well as the community health workers whose dedication ensured that Mectizan reached the people who needed it."

About the Mectizan Donation Program

Established in 1987, the Mectizan Donation Program (MDP) is the longest-running drug donation program for neglected tropical diseases (NTDs). MDP has worked with partners in 58 countries in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and the Western Pacific to achieve a future free of river blindness (onchocerciasis) and lymphatic filariasis (LF or elephantiasis).

MDP oversees Merck's donation of Mectizan® to eligible countries to free millions of people at risk of infection by eliminating these two debilitating diseases.

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