

From VOA Learning English, welcome back to AS IT IS. I'm your host Mario Ritter.

India is one of the last remaining places in the world with polio infections. Now the crippling disease is being brought under control. We also hear how Buddhist travelers seeking spiritual renewal are bringing needed tourism income to parts of India. But first, we learn about the results of the meeting of BRICS nations.

The BRICS nations are Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

Leaders of the five countries met in the South African port city of Durban last week with the goal of increasing economic cooperation and development. Kelly Jean Kelly has more.

The BRICS nations account for one fourth of the world's economic production. The developing economies say they want more influence in the international community. This led them to form their group of large, developing economies.

South Africa is the newest member of the group. It hosted this year's meeting with the ceremony of a major international summit.

The main goal of the meeting was to create a development bank to assist with important projects such as roads, railways and ports. Africa will need an estimated \$200 billion in new infrastructure during the next 20 years.

South African President Jacob Zuma said the group has agreed on the idea for the bank, but not the details.

“Following the report from our finance ministers, we are satisfied that the establishment of a new development bank is feasible and viable. We have agreed to establish the new development bank. The initial capital contribution to the bank should be substantial and sufficient for the bank to be effective in financing infrastructure.”

Mr. Zuma signed several agreements at the summit. They include a shipbuilding deal with China worth billions of dollars.

BRICS country leaders made a statement about non-economic issues. Human rights groups and humanitarian agencies had asked that the group comment on the violence in Syria. In a statement, the leaders condemned human rights violations in Syria. They also said they believe in a Syria-led political process. And they called on all parties to permit humanitarian aid to reach those in need in Syria.

Next year's BRICS summit will be held in Brazil.

I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

The World Health Organization says that the disease polio is no longer widespread, or endemic, in India. In 2009, half of the world’s cases of polio were in India.

In 2011, there was only one new case of polio in the country. VOA’s Karen Leggett has the story, that we broadcast earlier, of how India has worked to end the spread of the disease.

Polio is caused by a virus. It spreads very quickly from one person to another. Victims often lose the use of their arms and legs. In the most serious cases, polio can kill a person.

Twenty-five years ago, polio affected about 200,000 children in India each year. The United Nations children’s organization, UNICEF, sent teams of health workers into local villages. Team members like Zareena Parveen told families in her neighborhood about the importance of giving liquid medicine to children to protect them against polio.

“They used to think that our children will become sterile and will not be able to have children when they grow up. They used to think like this before. But now they don’t. Now they allow their kids to get the drops.”

Asma Khatun is a mother in the town of Ghaziabad in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh.

“Whenever anyone comes, we get the children vaccinated. Even if nobody came to our house, we would send our children to a clinic to get vaccinated.”

A local Muslim leader says the vaccination campaign has been successful because it is supported by religious leaders.

“The polio vaccination campaign has been successful here because our Muslim scholars are with us. With their support, we are able to make people understand that giving children the vaccine is beneficial and crucial.”

The Indian government has now launched a new campaign to vaccinate 170-million children under the age of five. The campaign will target newborn babies, migrants and people living in poor, crowded areas where the disease spreads more quickly.

I'm Karen Leggett.

The Buddhist religion is more than 2,500 years old. Buddhism began in India, but went on to gain popularity in other parts of Asia. Now India is using its rich Buddhist tradition to appeal to foreign travelers. Here is a report from Steve Ember which we broadcast earlier.

From a train station in New Delhi, the Mahaparinirvan Express begins an eight-day trip to three Indian states. The train stops at some places considered holy to Buddhists. They include Bodh Gaya, where Buddha first gained spiritual enlightenment; Sarnath, where he gave his first religious message; Varanasi, where he spoke; and Kusinagar, where he died.

Many of the holy sites are in some of India’s poorest states. For years, they were difficult to reach. As a result, only a few religious tourists have made the effort. But in recent years, India has been developing what it calls its spiritual tourism. It hopes to interest more visitors from countries with large Buddhist populations like Japan and Thailand.

India is working to connect major Buddhist heritage sites through a railroad system on which the Mahaparinirvan Express operates.

Bihar State is in one of the poorest and least-developed areas in India. It is also home to most of the Buddhist holy places. Ten years ago, very few foreigners visited the area. Today, millions of them do. I’m Steve Ember.

Thank you for listening today. You can read and download our programs at learningenglish.voanews.com. Follow us on Facebook, Youtube and Twitter. Email us at special@voanews.com. And join us at the beginning of the hour Universal Time for the latest news.