

UNICEF says childhood malnutrition in Haiti spikes



Marie Rose Emile watches over her 6-month-old grandson Jonise as he is treated for malnutrition at the Hospital of Immaculate Conception in Les Cayes, Haiti [File: Joseph Odelyn/The Associated Press]

United Nations, May 31 (RHC)-- Severe acute childhood malnutrition is expected to more than double this year in Haiti as the country struggles with the coronavirus pandemic, a spike in violence, and dwindling resources, according to a report from the United Nation's Children's Fund (UNICEF).

More than 86,000 children under the age of five could be affected, compared with 41,000 reported last year, according to Jean Gough, UNICEF's regional director for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Severe acute malnutrition is considered a life-threatening condition. In a slightly less dangerous category, acute malnutrition in kids younger than 5 in Haiti has risen 61 percent, with some 217,000 children expected to suffer from it this year, compared with 134,000 last year.

"I was saddened to see so many children suffering from malnutrition," Gough said after a week-long visit to Haiti. "Some will not recover unless they receive treatment on time." Overall, UNICEF said, about 4.4 million of Haiti's more than 11 million inhabitants lack sufficient food, including 1.9 million children.

Gough told The Associated Press during a recent visit to a hospital in the southern city of Les Cayes that UNICEF has only a one-month supply left of a special food paste given to children in need and is seeking \$3m by the end of June.

Officials said the pandemic has also disrupted health services, with childhood immunisation rates dropping from 28 to 44 percent, depending on the vaccine. The decrease has led to a rise in diphtheria cases as health workers brace for an expected measles outbreak this year. UNICEF noted that unvaccinated children also are more likely to die from malnutrition.

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