

UN appeals for help as fears grow over cholera's spread in Haiti

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A woman uses a towel to swat flies away from her daughter stricken with cholera, at a clinic run by Doctors Without Borders in Port-au-Prince, Haiti [Odelyn Joseph/AP Photo]

United Nations, November 16 (RHC)-- The United Nations and authorities in Haiti have called for international assistance to respond to a deadly outbreak of cholera that the World Health Organization has warned puts hundreds of thousands of people across the Caribbean nation at risk.

In a statement on Tuesday, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA) appealed for \$145.6 million to help Haiti contain the outbreak, which began in early October, and provide

much-needed assistance to its citizens.

More than 7,200 people have been hospitalised with cholera in Haiti and at least 155 have died as of Saturday, according to the latest figures (PDF) from the Haitian public health department. But the real figures are believed to be higher due to under-reporting.

“Cholera is a preventable and treatable disease, and based on their experience and expertise, national institutions quickly put together a response strategy with the determined support of the entire local and international humanitarian community,” UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator, Ulrika Richardson, said in Tuesday’s statement. “However, the surge in cases in recent weeks and the rapid spread of cholera in the country is worrying,” Richardson said.

Haiti’s response to the cholera outbreak has been complicated by increased gang violence and instability, which skyrocketed in the aftermath of President Jovenel Moise’s assassination in Port-au-Prince last year.

A weeks-long gang blockade on a petrol terminal in the capital that began in September led to water and electricity shortages, crippling the Haitian healthcare network and prompting experts to warn that the country faced a “time bomb for cholera.”

Caused by drinking water or eating food contaminated with cholera bacteria, the illness can trigger severe diarrhoea as well as vomiting, thirst and other symptoms. It also spreads rapidly in areas without adequate sewage treatment or clean drinking water.

While the Haitian authorities regained control of the blockaded Varreux fuel terminal this month – allowing petrol stations to reopen and spurring cheers in the streets of Port-au-Prince – a spokesman for Haiti’s health ministry warned that it could lead to more cholera cases. “Now people are going to move around more,” Dr Jeanty Fils told The Associated Press news agency. “It could start spreading.”

Fils said the government is struggling to find life-saving equipment, such as IV supplies, as a discussion continues over whether to request cholera vaccines. “We need more resources,” he said. “Cholera cases continue to climb in Haiti.”

Stephanie Mayronne, medical operations manager for Doctors Without Borders (Medecins Sans Frontieres, or MSF), said that if people with cholera start travelling to areas with poor sanitation and a lack of drinking water, the number of cases will likely rise. “It’s a match that can light a fire,” she told AP.

Haiti had last reported a cholera case more than three years ago, after a 2010 outbreak linked to United Nations peacekeepers caused approximately 10,000 deaths and more than 820,000 infections. That outbreak was tied to a sewage leak from a UN peacekeeping base, spurring condemnation and sowing public distrust in the international body across Haiti. The UN apologised in 2016 for its role in the epidemic.

In early October, a World Health Organization (WHO) official said the agency was submitting a request for cholera vaccines for Haiti. The WHO’s Americas branch, the Pan American Health Organization, told AP that it is supporting Haiti’s government in preparing a request for vaccines as well as planning and implementing vaccination campaigns. But it is not clear if and when that might happen.

Meanwhile, crippling poverty and a lack of access to sanitation and clean water have left thousands of Haitians vulnerable; the WHO has warned that as many as 500,000 people are at risk of contracting cholera.

Patrick Joseph, 40, was among the thousands recently hospitalised after he became severely dehydrated. “I don’t know where I got cholera from,” he said, although he suspects it was from the water he buys from a seller who claims it was treated. “I feared that I would die if I did not go to the doctor,” Joseph said.

Lovena Shelove, 30, lost her two-year-old son to cholera despite a kind neighbour who brought drinking water to try and revive the toddler after severe bouts of vomiting and diarrhea. “I don’t have anything in the house,” she said. “I could not afford anything to provide for the kids.” Her other child, a seven-month-old daughter, is still hospitalised.

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