

Cholera surges in Haiti

Efforts to stem the outbreak are being hampered by fuel shortages and violence. Joe Parkin Daniels reports.



Haiti is struggling to contain a cholera outbreak as treatment centres are overwhelmed and the political and security crises in the Caribbean country worsen, complicating the response. In a memorandum published on Nov 20, the Haitian health ministry reported that there were 924 confirmed cases of the bacterial disease and 10 671 suspected cases. 188 cholera-related deaths have been reported so far. The first case of the new outbreak was detected in the capital, Port-au-Prince, on Sept 29. Haiti had not reported a case of cholera—a disease usually spread through contaminated water supplies—for nearly 3 years, following an outbreak that began in 2010 and killed 10 000 people. That outbreak was blamed on a UN peacekeeping force that was stationed in the country following a devastating earthquake. “This is a dangerous situation, and [the Pan American Health Organization] PAHO urges all countries to increase vigilance, while we support Haiti in providing life-saving care to patients, deploying health workers, and facilitating access to fuel for health facilities”, PAHO’s Director Carissa Etienne said in a press conference.

UNICEF has warned that children account for nearly 40% of Haiti’s cholera cases in the current outbreak, with children less likely to have received any vaccine or immunity from the previous outbreak. The UN agency also reported that nine in ten confirmed cholera cases have been in areas affected by the country’s malnutrition crisis. The UN reports that 4·7 million people are currently facing acute hunger in Haiti—nearly half the population. Meanwhile, violent armed gangs continue to complicate health responses by blockading key roads and stifling the nation’s fuel supplies, which are vital for hospital

infrastructure in a country without a major power grid. “In Haiti, the vicious cycle between malnutrition and cholera can be broken”, said Manuel Fontaine, UNICEF’S Director of the Office of Emergency Programmes during a recent visit to Haiti. “Simple, affordable and effective treatment can save Haitian children’s lives, as long as we reach the most vulnerable families before it’s too late.”

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A study published as a preprint by researchers from the University of Florida and Gheskio (a Haitian health-care centre that runs the country’s first permanent cholera treatment facility) shows that the same strain of cholera responsible for the 2010 outbreak is present in current cases. Jean William Pape, Gheskio’s Director and a leading epidemiologist, said that fuel shortages caused by gang blockades have exacerbated the cholera outbreak. “Because of the lack of fuel, public transportation stopped and most health centres were not operational, hence people with cholera could not seek medical care”, Pape told *The Lancet*. “This is perhaps why the reemergence of cholera started at least at two different locations, both deprived of potable water.”

Pape went on to say that amid the ongoing political crisis in Haiti—which has been without an elected government since the assassination of President Jovenel Moise in July, 2021—disinformation about cholera is spreading, with people believing that the outbreak is an invention. “This can be overcome as people will see others around them getting sick and

with ongoing messages on prevention and treatment measures by the health ministry”, Pape said.

Fuel shortages and gang violence have also prevented investigators from the ministry of health from accessing heavily crowded slums where outbreaks are believed to be the worst. The same security concerns are delaying the installation of oral rehydration points in vulnerable neighbourhoods, and preventing residents from seeking care at cholera treatment centres. “The biggest challenge in this current context is access to the most affected areas and the lack of adequate structure to respond effectively to these problems”, said Judes Jonathas, the Senior Programme Manager for Mercy Corps in Haiti. “We have advocated with the government to promote access to reasonably priced clean water.”

The response has also been complicated by a global shortage of cholera vaccines. The International Coordinating Group, the body that manages emergency stocks of vaccines, is rationing doses. Countries are now administering a single dose of the oral cholera vaccine, instead of the usual two, in order to extend global supplies.

But aid workers in Haiti say that fighting cholera will be extremely difficult unless hygiene in the country’s most vulnerable neighbourhoods can be improved. “All slums in the capital are suffering a total lack of waste management due to insecurity”, said Mario Di Francesco, a water, sanitation, and hygiene expert at Associazione Volontari per Il Servizio Internazionale, an Italian charity with decades of experience in Haiti. “This is heavily affecting living conditions for hundreds of thousands of people. It’s an urgent and huge problem.”

Joe Parkin Daniels

For the preprint on the origins of the current cholera outbreak see medRxiv 2022; published online Nov 21. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2022.11.21.22282526>

For more on cholera vaccine shortages see [World Report Lancet 2022](#); **400**: 1502