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The official death toll from Haiti’s cholera epidemic had reached nearly 1,000 by Nov. 14, but the actual death toll is probably substantially higher. Some 15,000 people have been hospitalized.

The outbreak of the disease was first noted on Oct. 20 when reports of death and illness in remote rural areas of central Haiti began to reach the capital, Port-au-Prince. Since then, the number of recorded deaths has increased slowly, only to spike following the torrential rain and flooding brought by Hurricane Tomas in early November. Cholera is an intestinal infection caused by bacteria transmitted through contaminated water. The source of the contamination is usually the feces of infected people.

As the illness ravages remote rural areas, many of the dead have gone uncounted. As feared, the disease has now reached the shantytowns that make up the cities of Gonaïves and Port-au-Prince. A major, terrifying epidemic is at hand.

The arrival of cholera in the capital in early November was no surprise, and there is a real fear that the epidemic will take hold in the camps housing the 1.5 million people displaced by the January earthquake (NotiCen, Jan. 21, 2010). In these overcrowded camps, there is no running water or sewage system, and people share portable toilets. By mid-November, 27 deaths had been recorded in Port-au-Prince, but many more are inevitable as the disease continues to make what appears to be an unstoppable advance.

On Nov. 14, the British development agency ActionAid reported around 30 people "dropping dead" in the streets of Gonaïves. In rural areas surrounding the city, there were unconfirmed reports of whole families dying without any help, as local people shun the sick amid growing fear of the disease. The threat of contagion from improperly disposed of bodies is causing increasing alarm.

Criticism of inadequate response grows

As it becomes clear that the disease is spreading fast across the country and that prevention efforts have thus far been woefully inadequate, criticism of the authorities and the international organizations that have effectively run the country since the earthquake is growing.

Stephane Reynier, director of operations for Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), said, "The situation is very alarming. MSF structures are overrun by the number of patients, not just in Port-au-Prince, but nationally. We are fast and on the frontline, but we cannot control a national epidemic alone. Where is the UN? Where are the NGOs [nongovernmental organizations]? Where are the billions of dollars that were promised after the earthquake?"

The answers to these questions are not easy to find. At an international donors’ conference in March, nearly US$10 billion in reconstruction aid was promised (NotiCen, March 25, 2010), but by early October not one cent of the US$1.15 billion that the US pledged for rebuilding had been disbursed. About 50 other nations and organizations pledged a total of US$8.75 billion for reconstruction, but just US$686 million of that had reached Haiti six months later. A variety of
reasons have been given for the meager disbursement, including bureaucracy, a lack of urgency, the advent of other emergencies such as the Pakistan floods, and concerns about the Haitian government’s ability to administer the funds.

Hospital story illustrates international-aid failures

The story of the country's largest public hospital illustrates the abject failure of the international aid effort, a failure that is now threatening to claim many thousands of lives. The Hôpital de l'Université d'Etat d'Haïti in central Port-au-Prince is woefully unprepared for the cholera epidemic. Yet, after January's devastating earthquake, scores of foreign doctors from international medical charities flew in to treat the injured, charities donated new equipment, and the hospital set up its first intensive-care unit.

Ten months later, the foreign doctors and charities are gone. The intensive-care unit is closed. Hospital director Alix Lassegue said, "Now the hospital is the way it was before the earthquake."

The hospital’s annual budget is just US$5 million, 95% of which goes to pay salaries. By comparison, MSF raised US$100 million for its Haiti program after the earthquake, while the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) raised US$816 million.

Even as international aid workers and the UN are belatedly focusing their efforts on stemming the spread of the cholera outbreak, Haitians are increasingly turning their attention to its origins and asking how a disease unknown in Haiti for more than 100 years could suddenly break out in a remote countryside district.

UN peacekeepers blamed for cholera outbreak

Fingers are being pointed at the UN peacekeeping base outside the central town of Mirebalais where a battalion of soldiers from Nepal are stationed. The UN base is perched above a source of the Meille River, a tributary to the Artibonite River which flows across central Haiti. The Artibonite River has been the source of most of the initial infections. In late October, hundreds of Haitians marched to the base to demand that the Nepalese soldiers leave the country, and further anti-UN demonstrations have taken place in Port-au-Prince and Cap-Haïtien.

Some political leaders have joined in blaming the Nepalese for bringing cholera into Haiti (the disease is still endemic in Nepal). Their claims appeared to be reinforced in early November when the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced that its tests showed that the outbreak in Haiti matches strains commonly found in South Asia.

The cholera epidemic brings the planned general elections scheduled for Nov. 28 into serious doubt. At present, there are no suggestions of postponing the elections, but if, as seems likely, the disease continues to spread, it would be reckless in the extreme to ask voters to stand together in vast crowds waiting outside polling stations with no toilet facilities in the vicinity.

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