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Aftermath of Hurricane Matthew Brings Threat of Food Shortages, More Cholera

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Hurricane Matthew, the Category 4 storm that ravaged southwest Haiti in October, has deepened this Caribbean island nation’s ongoing political crisis and left massive destruction that puts the country in danger of widespread food shortages and devastating epidemics (NotiCen, Oct. 20, 2016).

Matthew has made the situation even worse for the 80% of the 10.8 million Haitians who live in severe poverty and survive on a daily income of less than US$2. Many are still waiting for a solution to their critical situation as victims of the magnitude-7.0 earthquake that struck Port-au-Prince on Jan. 12, 2010, killing over 200,000 people, displacing another 600,000, and leaving 1.5 million homeless (NotiCen, April 29, 2010, Oct. 20, 2011, Jan. 10, 2013).

The afternoon of Sept. 29, Matthew was a Category 1 event with winds of 119 km per hour, but in just 24 hours, it jumped up three levels, with winds of up to 209 km per hour—its destructive power when it struck Haiti four days later. The storm ripped through the country’s southwestern peninsular sector, from the coastal town of Les Anglais in the Sud department and followed a northward trail which eventually led it through Cuba, other countries in the Caribbean, and into southeastern US.

Latest in a string of tragedies
In Haiti’s long history of destructive natural events—which starts with an earthquake in 1564—Hurricane Matthew stands out as one of the strongest. Official and UN provisional figures say that as many as 1,000 people were killed, and around 800 are still missing. More than 180,000 have been left homeless, and approximately 1.4 million people are in need of emergency assistance.

In the early aftermath of the hurricane, the UN called on the international community to raise US $120 million to address Haiti’s most pressing needs derived from the storm.

With difficulty, international aid has begun to reach communities that are isolated because of major damage to road infrastructure—including a key bridge that was washed away by an overflowing river—dramatically coupled with additional flooding caused by seasonal rains. Those villages are also confronted with total or partial destruction of houses, including local health and educational facilities. Some teams from the International Medical Corps have reached communities on foot, in some areas wading waist-deep water, according to media reports.

Added to that, Haiti faces what might be the emergency’s two worst components: food shortages and the threat of an upsurge of the cholera epidemic unleashed in October of 2010, shortly after the earthquake (NotiCen, Nov. 18, 2010).

Agricultural areas destroyed
Besides damaging infrastructure, Matthew ripped through vast areas of the country’s agricultural region, destroying banana and cocoa plantations as well as damaging fishing boats. International aid
agencies are now concerned about what they describe as an imminent shortage of food. The UN’s World Food Programme (WFP) estimates that 800,000 people are in urgent need of food aid.

Matthew has also caused new cholera cases, the continuation of a health crisis believed to have been triggered by Nepalese members of the Mission des Nations Unies pour la Stabilization en Haïti (United Nations Mission for Stabilization in Haiti, MINUSTAH). The epidemic was traced to MINUSTAH barracks in the southern town of Mirebalais, near Haiti’s largest river, the Artibonite, 60 km northeast of Port-au-Prince (NotiCen, March 28, 2013, and Oct. 3, 2013).

According to recent government estimates and the UN-managed Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), close to 27,000 cholera cases have been reported in the first 10 months of this year, 240 of them fatal. Immediately after Matthew, at least a dozen people died of the disease in Haiti’s battered southwest, according to early official figures. Since the hurricane, over 3,400 suspected cases have been reported.

The outlook in this regard is grim, as St. Boniface Haiti Foundation president Conor Shapiro told reporters, predicting “many more cases of cholera, and unnecessary deaths, all across areas affected by the hurricane if large-scale cholera treatment and prevention response doesn’t reach them immediately.”

Two weeks after the storm, Haiti’s Ministère de la Santé Publique et de la Population (Public Health and Population Ministry) announced an anti-cholera vaccination campaign, including the distribution of chlorine tablets for water purification and rehydration salts, with support from the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). The efforts were to be focused on Grand’Anse and Sud, aimed at covering over 800,000 people.

As he told reporters that under 30 percent of health facilities are operational in the two battered southern states, PAHO spokesperson Daniel Epstein warned that effectiveness of anti-cholera shots is in the 65-85 percent range.

The vaccine is “not the panacea,” but its purpose is “to save lives in the short term,” Epstein explained, immediately warning that vaccination is “not a replacement for water and sanitation efforts,” which are essential, because cholera is easy to spread.

‘Race against time’
Beatrice Lindstrom, of the Boston-based Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti (IJDH), spoke of the urgency to local media 10 days after the hurricane. “It’s a race against time,” she said.

Lindstrom recalled that six years ago, 1,000 people were impacted in the first month of the epidemic. “We’re really afraid that the same thing will happen in this situation,” she said.

Describing the present scenario in the communities hit by the storm as “horrific,” Lindstrom said that several towns were “completely cut off from aid because they are so inaccessible by road, and even [in] the ones that are slowly getting aid in, there is a huge shortage of potable water.”

Treating the disease has become difficult in the hurricane-battered region due to destruction of medical facilities, isolation of communities because of severe road infrastructure damage, and shortage of health personnel.
Eli Pierre Celestin, a member of the Health Ministry cholera team, pointed out that one such case was Randel, a town in the ravaged southwestern peninsula, where as early as Oct. 8, cholera had claimed six lives.

“Randel is isolated,” Celestin said, “people have started dying.” He added that in health centers not damaged by the hurricane “there are nurses but no doctors.”

And in a press release issued Oct. 14, CERF warned that “hurricane Matthew is feared to significantly worsen the situation and increase the risk of a larger outbreak.”

Coinciding with the CERF forecast, US- and Haiti-based Haitian Health Foundation (HHF) director Nadesha Mijoba told reporters that “what Matthew didn't kill, cholera and infections are going to. Infections are coming in.”

The destruction of infrastructure has also led Haitian election authorities to delay yet again the rerun of last year’s presidential vote, which was re-scheduled in the face of the discovery of colossal irregularities.

The original rerun date had been set by the Conseil Électoral Provisoire (Provisional Electoral Council, CEP) for Oct. 9, but the destruction of buildings and road infrastructure resulting from Matthew led the election authority to re-schedule the ballot for Nov. 20. However, as CEP president Léopold Berlanger warned when he made the announcement, it is not altogether certain that the vote will be held then (NotiCen, March 3, 2016, Sept. 1, 2016, Oct. 20, 2016).

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