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Dengue Epidemic Spreads

by LADB Staff

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Dengue fever has reached epidemic proportions in El Salvador this year, killing nine children and one adult. The epidemic, which appears to be receding now, reached its highest levels in June.

Some doctors and political leaders say the administration of President Francisco Flores did not call a health alert early enough, thus slowing the mobilization necessary to stamp out the virus' transmitter, the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito. They also criticize Flores for refusing Cuba's offer to send doctors. The illness, sometimes called break-bone fever, attacks people in tropical and subtropical regions. Classic dengue is characterized by intense fever, migraine headaches, rashes, and pain in muscles and joints and behind the eyes.

Dengue hemorrhagic fever (DHF), a less common but more dangerous form of dengue, is known to cause internal bleeding, liver enlargement, and, in severe cases, circulatory failure. The recent deaths in El Salvador are attributed to DHF, which is also a leading cause of hospitalization and death among children in several Asian countries. Mosquito can breed in any solid object that holds water. The World Health Organization (WHO) says that the *Aedes aegypti* breeds primarily in containers like earthenware jars, metal drums, and concrete cisterns used for domestic water storage, as well as discarded plastic food containers, used automobile tires, and other items that collect rainwater.

Horacio Toro Ocampo, a representative of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), says that, after the Salvadoran population took measures to get rid of breeding places for the *Aedes aegypti* after the dengue outbreak of 2000, the population let down its guard and the virus returned. The weather phenomenon El Nino, which causes drastic climactic changes, exacerbated the problem. "With the drought initiated by El Nino," Toro says, "people began to keep water in containers." He says recent heavy rains resulted in the accumulation of water in trash cans and leftover containers, providing breeding places for the *Aedes aegypti*. Toro maintains that, as long as people do not learn to dispose of garbage correctly, there is a latent risk of creating breeding places for the mosquito in any solid container that can hold water. The organization said that residents of infected homes should ask for mosquito-killing chemicals from government-sponsored health units.

By mid-June, PAHO was estimating that the dengue epidemic was more severe than the one in 2000, which took the lives of 33 children and two adults, and that it threatened to become national and even regional.

Epidemic attacks urban areas

The southern zone of Greater San Salvador has been hit particularly hard by the virus. The populous municipalities of Soyapango and Ilopango, which lie east of San Salvador, have also suffered because of the virus. In Ilopango, one hospital was so crowded that dengue-infected

children had to double up in hospital beds. In Soyapango, doctors worked 20-hour shifts attending to sick children.

Dr. Guillermo Mata Bennet, president of El Salvador's medical association, criticized the Ministry of Health for not declaring an emergency until June. Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) Mayor Oscar Ortiz of Santa Tecla shared the criticism, pointing out that municipal governments took the lead in fighting dengue. "It's better to take measures before the situation gets worse," said Ortiz. "We were trying to tell the Ministry of Health that there should be a plan on this matter; granted, we shouldn't alarm the population, but it's better to take the lead with actions."

Iliana Segovia, director of human development of the mayor's office in Soyapango, said that, before the central government's emergency declaration, her municipality had been on a dengue alert for six weeks. She says the Health Ministry's earlier insistence that the situation was not serious exacerbated the problem, slowing the population's adoption of sanitary measures to prevent the spread of the virus.

Congress approves emergency powers; opposition objects

In mid-June, the government declared a national emergency in the departments of Santa Ana, La Libertad, Cabanas, and San Salvador, sending soldiers into areas affected by the dengue epidemic. The Legislative Assembly approved the emergency decree so that Health Ministry fumigation brigades could enter abandoned homes or homes where residents put up resistance. "We want to tell the people that we have the power to enter residences that are found to have high rates of mosquito larva and, at the same time, we ask for the collaboration of everyone in this struggle," said Vice-Minister of Health Herbert Betancourt.

On June 21, the Assembly also approved a state-of-disaster decree granting the executive the discretion to take money from the budgets of any government ministries to confront the virus. Enrique Valdez, a leader of the governing Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA), said the decree was necessary to deal with the epidemic. However, the FMLN opposed the emergency powers over ministerial budgets. FMLN

Deputy Violeta Menjivar said the Assembly had given the administration a "blank check" that would "open the door to a ton of arbitrary decisions in the use of public resources." Instead, the FMLN called for increasing the public-health budget. "This decree is not necessary to kill mosquitoes; what we need is the mobilization of the state health apparatus," Menjivar said. In addition to the house-to-house visits, the government launched a campaign of aerial fumigation against the mosquito.

An environmental group, Unidad Ecologica Salvadorena (UNES), opposed aerial fumigation, claiming that the insecticide caused cancer, eye irritation, and breathing problems for people with asthma. Health Ministry entomologists said aerial and house-to-house fumigations have reduced the numbers of *Aedes aegypti* larva. Pointing to the recent drop in the number of reported cases of dengue, state authorities predict that the epidemic will end soon.

President Flores rejects help from Cuba

In mid-June, Flores rejected assistance from Cuba in the fight against dengue, suggesting that Cuban doctors were incompetent. Despite his statements, the president's rejection of Cuban medical assistance seems to have more to do with political rifts with the Cuban government. At the November 2000 Inter-American Summit in Panama, Cuban President Fidel Castro accused the Salvadoran government of harboring anti-Castro terrorist Luis Posada Carriles (see NotiCen, 2000-11-30). At the time, Cuban doctors were assisting El Salvador during the 2000 dengue epidemic.

In view of Cuba's medical contributions to El Salvador, former FMLN vice-presidential candidate Nidia Diaz criticized Flores' lack of gratitude to Cuba, which was reflected in his abstention in that year's UN vote to condemn the US embargo against Cuba (see NotiCen, 2000-11-30). Upon rejecting Cuban medical help in June, Flores announced he was seeking the assistance of doctors in the Miami Cuban-exile community. Eleven Miami doctors arrived in El Salvador on June 20.

However, on June 22 the Salvadoran daily *El Diario de Hoy* reported that the Miami doctors were of little assistance to patients suffering from dengue. A nurse at the intensive-care ward at the Bloom Hospital in San Salvador where the doctors visited remarked, "They know very little about the subject." The official Cuban government newspaper *Granma* said the Miami doctors "were already packing their bags" upon arriving in El Salvador. *Granma* ridiculed the doctors' three-day visit and suggested that Flores' rejection of Cuban assistance was designed to please US President George W. Bush. "Flores prefers Bush's blessing to the lives of his own people," the paper said.

Earlier this year, Cuba eradicated its own dengue outbreak after a 75-day campaign. In the campaign, homes and other buildings were repeatedly sprayed while Cuban newspapers counseled the population about sanitary measures. The disease took the lives of two Cubans.

Controversy about introduction of dengue into Americas

There are four distinct, but closely related, viruses that cause dengue. The Salvadoran daily *La Prensa Grafica* said two dengue viruses, serotypes DEN-1 and DEN-2, have been reported in El Salvador. No major outbreak of serotype two and DHF had ever been recorded in Latin America until 1981. In that year, Cuba was hit hard by the unfamiliar serotype. During the course of the epidemic, 344,203 people were reportedly infected with dengue, and 101 children and 57 adults died as a result. That year, the Cuban government publicly accused the US government of causing the dengue epidemic by introducing the *Aedes aegypti* on the island.

Castro blamed the outbreak of DHF on a US program of biological warfare. He said US operatives had also introduced swine fever, blue mold in tobacco, sugar-cane rot, and hemorrhagic conjunctivitis into Cuba (see NotiCen, 2002-05-23).

In 1984, Eduardo Arocena, head of anti-Castro terrorist group Omega 7, testified before a US federal jury, while he was being tried for the murder of a Cuban diplomat, that anti-Castro groups carried "some germs to introduce them to Cuba to be used against the Soviets and against the Cuban

economy" in 1980. Arocena said that the germs "later produced results that were not what we had expected, because we thought that it was going to be used against Soviet forces, and it was used against our own people, and with that we did not agree." Cuban officials have pointed to both Arocena's admission and to past US biological warfare experimentation with mosquitos as evidence of US complicity in the introduction of DHF into Cuba. US officials generally ridicule these claims as fantasy and paranoia.

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