

Secretary-General

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COLLECTIVE EFFORTS IN HAITI WILL BE OVERWHELMED WITHOUT MASSIVE, IMMEDIATE

RESPONSE, SECRETARY-GENERAL WARNS IN REMARKS TO GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Following are UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's remarks to the General Assembly informal meeting on Haiti, in New York today, 3 December:

Thank you for this opportunity to brief you on the grave humanitarian situation in Haiti.

The challenges arising from the 12 January earthquake — enormous as they were already — have been compounded by the needs arising from the passage of Hurricane Tomas, the cholera outbreak and increasing political tensions.

As you know, the epidemic has spread to all 10 departments of the country, as well as the capital, Port-au-Prince. The Ministry of Public Health reports that the number of deaths has exceeded 1,800 and the number of infections is approaching 81,000. While these figures are alarming, the positive news is that the death rate has decreased over the past six weeks, from 7.6 per cent to 3.6 per cent.

Because the epidemic is concentrated in slums and rural areas, where many people do not have easy access to hospitals and clinics, these figures are rough estimates at best. Our teams believe the actual number of deaths and current infections may in fact be up to twice as high.

As you know, the first round of presidential and legislative elections took place last Sunday. I congratulate the Haitian people for their resilience in the face of the earthquake and the cholera outbreak, and for their clear determination to make their voices heard. While some violence and disruptions on Election Day are not exceptional in Haiti, the irregularities now seem more serious than initially thought.

Whatever the complaints or reservations about the process, I urge all political actors to refrain from violence and to start discussions immediately to find a Haitian solution to these problems — before a serious crisis develops. All involved must respect, and be seen to be respecting, the legal framework. Political leaders must put the national interest ahead of personal and partisan ambitions.

Any social unrest in the coming days will hinder cholera victims from receiving lifesaving treatment, as happened in Cap Haitien, where deaths rose after the violent unrest of 14-16 November. The international community stands by the Haitian people and is watching closely.

Let me return now to the cholera epidemic and the international response. Clearly, it will continue to spread, unfortunately. This is a function of a particularly virulent strain of cholera, as well as underlying issues: a weak national health system, poor sanitary conditions and the lack of clean water and other basic services. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO) estimate that the outbreak could affect as many as 650,000 people in the next six months.

Therefore, we have two priorities: first, minimizing the fatality rate through effective treatment; second, reaching the population, even in the most isolated areas, with information about treatment and prevention.

The Haitian Government, United Nations agencies and the humanitarian community are coordinating their response, providing treatment and putting preventive measures in place. Dozens of health partners are providing water-purification materials, carrying out large-scale public-information campaigns, and helping to build treatment centres. Ten of these will be established by the Cuban Medical Brigade in Haiti.

And yet one thing is clear: admirable as they may be, these collective efforts are simply not sufficient. Without a massive and immediate international response, we will be overwhelmed. The lives of hundreds of thousands of people are at risk. And it is up to us to act, with maximum speed and full resources.

Most immediately, there is an urgent need for more cholera treatment centres, both large and small. More trained medical and non-medical personnel are needed to run these facilities. PAHO and WHO estimate that an additional 350 doctors, 2,000 nurses and 2,200 support staff will be required over the next three months. This is in addition to the 300 medical personnel that Cuba has already committed.

Approximately 30,000 community health workers and volunteers also need to be trained to help staff an estimated 15,000 oral re-hydration points. Still others are required to educate and promote better hygiene in camps and communities.

It is vital that the Haitian people in all communities are fully informed about how to deal with this disease, and that they understand that cholera is quickly cured if it is quickly diagnosed and treated. They need to know what basic steps to take to protect themselves, their families and their communities.

Vital supplies are desperately needed: water purification tablets; chlorine disinfectant; antibiotics; jerry cans; soap; water cisterns; construction material for latrines. Stocks of oral re-hydration salts must be constantly replenished.

It is encouraging that fatality rates have gradually declined over the past six weeks. They remain, however, unacceptably high. We also note that the incidence of cholera is highest in Haiti's slums and rural areas, where people are farthest from our reach. In the camps where an estimated 1.3 million took refuge after this year's earthquake, ironically, incidence is relatively low. The reason: we are there with what is required — medical aid, sanitation, clean water.

To help Haiti help itself, we must extend our reach. That is why we are here today.

On 11 November, the United Nations and its partners issued the Cholera Inter-Sector Response Strategy for Haiti, a \$164 million funding appeal to support the international community's efforts to contain the outbreak. So far, it is only 20 per cent funded. I ask you, urgently, to help meet the appeal in full. And let us be realistic in doing so. The overall figures in this appeal are conservative estimates. Almost certainly, they will have to be revised upwards.

This will not be a short-term crisis. We cannot think short-term in our response. Millions of people look to us for immediate survival. At the same time, our response must be viewed within the broader context of recovery and long-term development.

Investment in basic infrastructure is critical — clean water, sanitation, health care and education, durable shelter and employment. Without it, Haiti has no sustainable future, no hope for a better future.

Along the way, we must continue to help strengthen Haitian institutions. Haiti needs a strong and legitimate Government to overcome the enormous challenges ahead. Sunday's elections were a milestone in the country's long and very hard road. Once again, I would like to express my gratitude for your generous assistance to Haiti and its people. They need, and deserve, our support.

Finally, let me say a few words as an additional matter. Let me say directly to you that I am determined to understand and address the manner in which the cholera outbreak occurred and was spread. The people of Haiti are suffering. They are suffering enormously, and they are asking legitimate questions. Where did this come from? How did this happen?

We may never be able to fully answer these complex, difficult questions, but they deserve our best efforts. MINUSTAH (United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti) and the Government of Haiti have carried out a number of tests of water samples from the Nepalese military camp in Mirebalais and waters adjacent to the base. All have so far proved negative.

We are continuing to take action on three critical fronts: first, MINUSTAH is monitoring the situation closely, drawing water samples from various sources and ensuring that waste waters do not flow into the rivers. Second, we are deploying a team of water, sanitation and hygiene experts to review all sanitation systems at MINUSTAH military, police and civilian installations. Third, I have instructed the Mission to actively follow up on any additional information it may receive on the origins of the current outbreak. This includes cooperating fully with national or competent authorities in any further effort to shed light on the source of the epidemic, to improve treatment for victims and to prevent further spread.

The people of Haiti deserve nothing less.