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Faced once again with the threat of cholera, Madagascar is preparing to close the door on a possible epidemic.

September 16, 2024

Mahajanga - "The 1999 cholera epidemic was surprising. The disease killed many people at the beginning of its outbreak. Since the risk factors for its spread are already present in Madagascar, there is no question of waiting for the epidemic to fully ensure that we can attack," says Professor Mamy Randria, infectious disease specialist and head of the infectious diseases department at the Joseph Raseta Befelatanana University Hospital (CHUJRB) in Antananarivo.

Every year, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), 95,000 people die from cholera and 2.9 million contract the disease, which affects many African countries. Currently, 13 African countries are affected by the epidemic, including the Comoros, which declared a re-emergence of the cholera epidemic on February 2, 2024.

Following the confirmation of cholera cases, including six deaths imported from Tanzania to the Comoros, Madagascar is once again facing the threat of cholera, with this devastating epidemic raging in neighboring countries. Although no cases, even suspected ones, have been officially declared in the country to date, Madagascar, still scarred by the trauma of a 1999 epidemic that claimed the lives of more than 1,500 people on the main island, is on the front line of defense in the Mahajanga district due to its proximity to the Comorian archipelago by sea.

The boat trip between the district of Mahajanga, a port city on the northwest coast of the country, and the Comorian archipelago, which is 345 km from Madagascar, generally takes between 44 and 48 hours. While speedboats can make the crossing in just 7 hours. On the other hand, a faster option is offered by the three weekly flights connecting the Comoros to Philibert Tsiranana International Airport in Ambovo, district of Mahajanga, capital of the Boeny region, with a flight time of about one hour.

This proximity increases concern and forces the Malagasy Ministry of Public Health, the WHO, and partners to urgently anticipate various measures to strengthen preparedness, infection prevention, and control capacities, particularly at health facilities and entry points. The objective is to contribute to reducing the risks of a possible cholera epidemic on the large island.

Since February, the borders have been under increased surveillance. Passengers arriving from the neighboring country must follow strict guidelines upon arrival. As soon as they step off the plane, all passengers must follow a series of preventive measures. These include strict protocols such as footbath disinfection and handwashing with soap upon landing, as well as spraying disinfectant on all carry-on and checked baggage, according to recommendations from the Ministry of Public Health and the WHO.

"The Ministry of Public Health, with the support of its partners such as the WHO, is learning crucial lessons from this painful past to address this new threat that worries us all. This explains all the efforts we are making to never again relive the painful experience of 1999. All health facilities are on alert, ready to deal with a possible epidemic," explains Professor Mamy RANDRIA, infectious disease specialist, Head of the Infectious Diseases Department at the Joseph Raseta Befelatanana University Hospital (CHUJRB) in Antananarivo.

In June 2024, WHO provided training to 76 health workers (doctors, paramedics, cleaners) in the Mahajanga district to improve their knowledge and skills in Infection Prevention and Control - Water Sanitation Hygiene (IPC-WASH). This capacity building enabled participants to leave with new knowledge on cholera, how to prevent, control and manage it.

"Preparation and prevention are very important steps for us. With this training, I learned how to monitor diarrhea, the chlorination dosage which allows to easily eliminate most microbes, bacteria, viruses and germs responsible for diseases like cholera. I also learned how to handle corpses which is an exercise just as important as caring for a cholera patient," says Dr. Perle TODIARIVO, Chief Physician of the Mahabibo Integrated Center, Mahajanga district, a participant in the training.

As part of the partnership between WHO and Russia to support essential health services in Madagascar, a humanitarian aid donation from Russia, worth approximately USD 120,000, consisting mainly of medicines and medical equipment, was also handed over to the Ministry of Public Health last June.

"These donations come at the right time to strengthen the fight against cholera, reduce the disease burden, and limit its spread, as well as that of many other diarrheal and enteric diseases. These free medicines will help vulnerable populations during outbreaks. We are now ready and well equipped for a rapid response," reassured Professor Laurent MUSANGO, WHO Resident Representative in Madagascar.

Furthermore, awareness-raising operations are in full swing across the country, particularly in the Mahajanga district, with posters in neighborhoods and gathering places such as parking lots, schools, and markets. Information spots are regularly broadcast on television and radio, emphasizing best practices.

"People are strongly encouraged to eat hot meals, strictly observe social hygiene, and wash their hands with soap after handling potentially dirty objects, especially after each defecation, in order to strengthen prevention against the spread of cholera," advised

Professor Mamy RANDRIA, infectious disease specialist, Head of the Infectious Diseases Department at the Joseph Raseta Befelatanana University Hospital (CHUJRB) in Antananarivo.



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