

Cholera outbreak in Darfur is made worse by advent of rains

Peter Moszynski

The spread of cholera to Sudan's Darfur region has caused international alarm, especially as it has arrived just at the start of the rainy season. Large areas are already cut off because of factional fighting, and the onset of the rains not only means that health workers can't reach many people but also heightens the risks of transmission.

The World Health Organization says that 96 cases of acute watery diarrhoea and four deaths had been identified in the state of South Darfur by 14 June. A sample from one person who died, sent to Khartoum for testing, confirmed the presence of *Vibrio cholerae*, Inaba serotype.

WHO said that most at risk are people outside the formal camp structures, such as those in the region's main towns, newly displaced people, and the thousands of refugees recently forced back into Sudan by insecurity in eastern Chad. A quarter of a million people have been displaced in recent months, in addition to the more than two million already displaced by violence.

Claire-Lise Chaigat, head of WHO's global task force on cholera control, said: "For the time being we are not too concerned about the population living in the camps, provided that relief agencies maintain their presence and their activities for outbreak preparedness and response." The immediate problem is the rest of northern Sudan, where there is "almost no international presence" and "surveillance is scarcely functioning."

She said the situation was "extremely worrying," especially as the outbreak had spread so rapidly across South Sudan, where it has killed 445 people and infected almost 14 000.

Unicef's goodwill ambassador Mia Farrow, who has just returned from a fact finding mission to the region, warned that opposition to last month's Darfur peace agreement, signed by only one of three rebel factions, meant that security had deteriorated so badly that agencies might soon pull out.

She said that the health and humanitarian situation was especially bad behind rebel lines, particularly after the recent arrest of the Sudan Liberation Movement's relief coordinator, Suleiman Gamous. He was detained by forces loyal to Minni Minnawi, the only faction leader to sign the peace agreement, whose failure to win popular support for its terms has led to serious fighting between factions.

Almost no one she encountered believed that the deal would enforce the disarmament of the Janjaweed militias or had confidence in the existing monitoring mission of the African Union, which was so badly resourced that it was "currently incapable of providing even token protection for civilians." Aid operations faced a "serious funding crisis." Unicef had only 20% of its required budget for Sudan.

Ms Farrow said she had been "shocked to find cholera in Darfur," as the situation was now "so precarious that relief operations could soon collapse." She warned, "Unless the United Nations acts immediately to improve security we could see thousands more deaths to add to the existing tragedy."

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