



Cholera epidemic spreads to Niger

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Niamey - A cholera epidemic in Niger has killed 58 people and spread to a refugee camp housing Malians who have fled the unrest in the north of their country, the UN said on Thursday.

"The overall number of cases reported as of 15 July is 2 900, with 58 deaths," the UN's Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs said in a report issued from Niger's capital Niamey.

"The number of cholera cases continues to increase [and] the ... situation remains worrying with the arrival of the rainy season," it added.

The epidemic broke out in January in the western region of Tillaberi.

Its spread to the Tabareybarey refugee camp - where the UN World Health Organisation has registered nine cases - is particularly worrying for health officials. The highly contagious intestinal illness can decimate refugee camps.

Aid group Doctors Without Borders's Swiss branch has opened a separate treatment centre nearby to care for the cholera patients and to try to stem the spread of the violent diarrhoea caused by the disease.

The UN refugee agency set up the Tabareybarey camp in June to shelter the flood of Malians fleeing the chaos sown by the rebellion in their country's north.

Rights groups say that the rebel groups there, who have have seized an area the size of France, have carried out rapes, executions and other atrocities.

The al-Qaeda-linked Islamist groups currently controlling the north are imposing strict Islamic law over their territory. They have publicly whipped and beaten locals accused of smoking, drinking and pre-marital sex.

Some 250 000 Malians have fled to neighbouring countries, including 52 000 to Niger, according to the UN refugee agency.
