

NEWS

Cholera epidemic in Haiti is blamed on poor sanitation

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The source of Haiti's ongoing cholera epidemic did not originate on the island, and the strain is very similar to those currently circulating in south Asia, says a report by an independent expert panel. The outbreak has so far claimed nearly 5000 lives.

The report says, "The evidence overwhelmingly supports the conclusion that the source of the Haiti cholera outbreak was due to contamination of the Meye tributary of the Artibonite River with a pathogenic strain of current South Asian type *Vibrio cholerae* as a result of human activity."

The report, commissioned by the United Nations' secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, after it was claimed that the epidemic had been caused by UN soldiers, stops short of blaming the blue helmets as the source of the epidemic. Instead it concludes that the outbreak "was caused by the confluence of circumstances . . . and was not the fault of, or deliberate action of, a group or individual."

However, the report says that sanitary conditions at the UN camp in Mirebalais "were not sufficient to prevent faecal contamination of the Meye tributary system of the Artibonite River."

Soldiers from Nepal, Argentina, Peru, and Bangladesh were stationed in these areas.

Yann Libessart, a spokesman for the charity Médecins Sans Frontières, told the *BMJ*: "The extent of the outbreak and the management of the patients affected highlights serious weaknesses with the health and sanitation services."

The investigative panel also concluded that the source of the cholera is no longer relevant to controlling the outbreak. It said, "What are needed at this time are measures to prevent the disease from becoming endemic."

As of 29 April Haiti's health ministry reported that 157 222 people with cholera had been admitted to hospital and that 4938

had died. These included 419 new cases, 225 hospitalisations, and five deaths.

The warning from the panel coincides with concerns voiced by health aid groups such as Partners in Health that the number of cases was likely to spike with the onset of the rainy season.

A health update by Haiti's health ministry and the Pan American Health Organization, the World Health Organization's regional office for the Americas, says that an upsurge in cholera outbreaks in isolated areas "has been observed in different parts of the country."

The expert panel recommended that to prevent introducing cholera into countries where it is not endemic UN personnel and emergency responders travelling from cholera endemic areas should receive a prophylactic dose of antibiotics before departure or should be screened.

It adds that to prevent the spread of cholera the UN and the government of Haiti should prioritise investment in piped supplies of treated drinking water and better sanitation throughout the country.

A spokesman for Mr Ban said that he intends to convene a task force to study the findings and recommendations "to ensure prompt and appropriate follow-up."

At present less than half of Haiti's population has access to drinking water, says the Pan American Health Organization, and only 16% of homes have latrines. Moreover, the lack of access to safe water in health centres "is still an unsolved problem," it noted.

Final Report of the Independent Panel of Experts on the Cholera Outbreak in Haiti is at www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/haiti/UN-cholera-report-final.pdf.

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