

Zimbabwe: Cholera death toll rises

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The cholera epidemic in Zimbabwe has now infected up to 24,000 people with nearly 1,200 deaths, according to the official figures from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Unofficial sources have claimed that the real figure for deaths from the disease is closer to 3,000.

The *Daily Mail* reported that gravediggers at a Harare cemetery were said to be burying more than 30 child victims of cholera each week.

The epidemic is still not under control. All ten provinces of the country are now affected and half the cases are in the capital, Harare.

Until recently President Robert Mugabe claimed there was no cholera outbreak. But the situation is now so severe, that even the state newspaper, the *Herald*, has admitted deaths of more than 750 people.

Given a basic health service, safe water supply and sewage system, cholera can be controlled and eliminated.

Cholera is a bacterial disease mainly transmitted by infected water or food. A small proportion of those infected develop serious diarrhea with consequent loss of bodily fluids that results in death. It can be successfully treated in most cases by rehydration therapy, usually using sachets of the required salt and sugar solution and if necessary administered directly into the blood stream by a drip.

For the last five years, the deaths from cholera in Zimbabwe have been well below 100 a year. Even in the worst case of 1999, only 385 people died out of 5,637 cases according to the World Health Organisation (WHO). These cases were largely in impoverished rural areas, not in the urban centres and Harare.

The fact that more than 90 percent of the annual figures for cholera deaths are in sub-Saharan Africa is one of the key indicators showing the extent that free market policies, dictated by the International Monetary Fund, have devastated the continent. But the extent of cholera cases and deaths, now hitting Zimbabwe, is exceptional and shows an infrastructure in a state of collapse. The sanitation system is not functioning with burst sewer pipes spilling raw sewage into the streets. Piped water, if available, is often likely to be contaminated. The IRIN news service reported recently that the state-owned Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA) had been pumping raw sewage into Lake Chivero, which supplies Harare

with drinking water. ZINWA recently ran out of the necessary chemicals to treat water in Harare, leaving the whole city without safe drinking water.

Many ordinary Zimbabweans have resorted to digging shallow wells to obtain drinking water. Often this water is contaminated by sewage water seeping into the ground from broken sewers. They are unable to boil the water to make it safer because they lack electricity, fuel or even wood to make fires. Aid agencies operating in Zimbabwe have begun drilling for water deeper underground, bypassing state structures, in an attempt to provide safe water.

Lack of rubbish collection increases the health risks. This is combined with lack of sufficient food. The UN and aid agencies recently estimated that half the population—some five million people—face starvation. Together with the impact of HIV-AIDS this has meant life expectancy in Zimbabwe has plummeted to just over 30 years.

Many cholera cases have not been treated because hospitals, along with the rest of the health service, have almost ceased to function. UNICEF reports that cholera treatment clinics are manned by a handful of staff, as doctors have no salaries and cannot afford to work. A report in the British *Guardian* newspaper, December 7, explained how the 5,000-bed Parirenyatwa hospital in Harare is turning away patients who go there looking for treatment. Most of the wards are empty. One of the doctors who had remained, told a reporter on condition of anonymity: "The staff just stopped coming to work and pay simply isn't worth anything. Nurses earned less than the bus fare to get here. We've been subsidizing the government for so long now. The nurses feel abused, misused."

A demonstration held last week by nurses and doctors protesting the state of the health service and their conditions met with police violence.

Zimbabwe's economy is in ruins. Official figures for inflation were 231 million percent last July. No figures have been made available since, but the newspaper of the Zimbabwe business community, the *Financial Gazette*, recently quoted unofficial analysts putting the inflation rate at one trillion percent, a world record. "Industry is slowly grinding to a halt after failing to

secure sufficient energy products such as coal, electricity and fuel at a time when production costs are rising exponentially in response to northward bound inflation," reports the *Gazette*. In agriculture, recent drought conditions have meant "the government has had to open the floodgates to imports, further stifling local production."

An economic analyst told the newspaper that less than one third of the targeted hectareage had been planted this season, so that "the 2008/9 agricultural season was already a write off." He estimated that some 90 percent of the population was living on less than a US dollar a day.

Large numbers of people are now fleeing Zimbabwe into neighboring countries. A British Channel 4 news report, December 2, estimated that around 6,000 people a day were cutting their way through the razor wire fences along the border with South Africa. Some people were in such a weakened state they were dying on the journey. Children were attempting to escape on their own. Cholera cases are now on the increase in South Africa, with at least eight deaths reported in the border town of Musina.

Only the most craven supporter of the Zimbabwe regime could deny Mugabe and the Zanu PF regime's responsibility for this dire situation. Mugabe fell out with the western powers and the International Monetary Fund in the late 1990s, after previously enjoying the best of relations with London and Washington following independence in 1980. He opposed the IMF conditions that were too onerous for his system of state patronage and was also angry at the growth of the political opposition, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), which, with western support, was gaining votes in parliamentary and presidential elections. The attempt at developing a national autarkic economy after seizing farms from white owners and handing most of them over to the rich Zanu-PF elite has been a complete disaster.

However, the MDC puts forward no alternative to Mugabe. The party is based on sections of Zimbabwe's wealthy elite that want to reintroduce IMF-dictated free market measures in order to gain western investment, especially in Zimbabwe's valuable mining sector. Its leader Morgan Tsvangirai has been involved in negotiations with Zanu-PF since last September, with the aim of setting up a power sharing regime. Talks reached a stalemate over who should take control over key ministries, with Mugabe insisting he hold on to the security services.

Throughout the last eight years the MDC, despite its members suffering arrests, torture and killings by the regime, has consistently opposed the development of a mass movement to overthrow Mugabe. Instead it has urged reliance on western support and diplomacy at every stage.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC), led by South Africa and regimes throughout the continent in the African Union, continue to back the power sharing talks, despite the catastrophe in Zimbabwe. Thirty years ago, African nationalists were prepared to lead movements to overthrow white racist regimes backed by the west. Now, whatever criticisms made of Mugabe, they uphold the right of each elite to rule its "own" nation state based on capitalist property relations, while the working class and the poor must accept disease and starvation. Zimbabwe is the outcome of this nationalist agenda.

Western governments and the media, after having initially backed the power sharing talks, have now become increasingly convinced that a deal with Mugabe is impossible and are demanding that he goes. They are attempting to use the acute divisions in Zanu-PF to bring a more amenable faction into power and into talks with the MDC.

The cholera epidemic has been used to put pressure on African countries, especially South Africa, to oust Mugabe. An editorial in the *Washington Post* entitled "South Africa's crime" denounced South African President Kgalema Motlanthe for wanting "to resuscitate Mr. Mugabe's dying regime through a bad deal cooked up by 'mediator' Thabo Mbeki, Mr. Motlanthe's predecessor." Instead he should demand that Mugabe step down. The *Post* has conveniently forgotten that the US and Britain supported the talks between Tsvangirai and Mugabe and had clearly hoped that South Africa diplomacy would provide them with a way forward in Zimbabwe.

So far only a few African countries such as Zambia, Botswana and Kenya have called for Mugabe to go. The Zimbabwe information minister, Sikhanyiso Ndlovu, even claimed last week that the US and UK had planted the cholera bacteria in the country to prepare for an invasion by Botswana.



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