Anti-UN protests spread as Haitians die without aid

Bill Van Auken
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Protests against United Nations troops spread to the capital of Port-au-Prince Thursday as growing numbers of Haitians were dying of cholera in the absence of significant aid from the UN or other relief agencies.

The latest report from the Haitian government has put the number of deaths from cholera at 1,180 and the number of people who have sought treatment at some 20,000. The figures, which do not include the increasing number of people dying in the streets and in their homes without ever receiving treatment, considerably underestimate the real toll.

Large numbers of protesters took to the streets of the capital on Thursday in demonstrations demanding the withdrawal of the UN occupation force, known as MINUSTAH (United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti), which many Haitians blame for bringing cholera into the country.

There were several clashes between the protesters and the UN troops, including one in which a patrol was attacked with a barrage of stones. Police and protesters faced off near the National Palace, Radio Metropole reported, with the police using tear gas to disperse the demonstration. Instances in which vehicles operated by foreign aid workers were attacked with rocks were also reported.

In several parts of the city, demonstrators erected barricades made of burning tires and tore down campaign posters for the Unity party of President René Preval and his hand-picked successor, Jude Celestin. Elections are scheduled for November 28.

The unrest in the capital followed three days of rioting in the northern port city of Cap Haitien, in which at least two people were killed, one shot in the back by UN troops, and a number of others wounded.

The immediate trigger for the upheavals is the growing conviction that cholera was introduced into Haiti by a battalion of UN troops brought from Nepal shortly before the first cases were reported. The Nepalese troops were based on the Artibonite River, whose contaminated waters have been determined as the source of the outbreak. It was also revealed that faulty sanitary facilities at the base were dumping sewage into the river.

Scientists at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the US have determined that the strain of cholera—a disease that had not been reported in Haiti for nearly a century—originated in south Asia. Nepal has been struck with its own epidemic of the disease.

UN officials have dismissed accusations that the Nepalese unit brought the disease into the country, claiming that none of the troops tested positive for cholera.

On Thursday, however, Nigel Fisher, the United Nations coordinator of humanitarian affairs in Haiti, revealed to Canada's CBC news that a French epidemiologist had conducted a study that directly tied the cholera strain in Haiti to Nepal.

Whatever the precise source of the cholera bacteria, the reality is that millions of Haitians have been left defenseless in the face of the disease because of a long legacy of economic exploitation and political oppression linked to the Caribbean nation's domination by US capitalism.

The vast majority of the population lacked access to clean water and adequate sanitation even before the devastating earthquake last January that killed a quarter of a million people and left a million and a half more people homeless, creating ideal conditions for the disease's spread.

UN officials have denounced the protests, charging that they have been orchestrated by "enemies of stability and democracy" for the purpose of destabilizing the country in advance of next week's election.

Large sections of the Haitian population are hostile to both the UN troops and the elections. The so-called "peace-keepers" are widely seen as an occupying army whose purpose is to suppress popular unrest and defend the interests of Haiti's ruling elite and foreign capital. The UN force was brought into the country in 2004 to relieve US Marines who invaded Haiti after a US-orchestrated coup that ended in the overthrow and exile of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Fanmi Lavalas, the party that backs Aristide and the only political organization in the country with a genuine popular base of support, is barred from running in the current election, as it has been in every vote since the US-backed coup.

UN officials and aid groups have warned that the growing popular upheavals are making it more difficult to provide treatment and prevention against cholera.

"Despite the urgent appeals of the humanitarian community,

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roads, airports and bridges are still blocked, barricades were still erected in the area of Cap-Haitien, one of the regions most affected by the spread of cholera," Edmond Mulet, special representative of the secretary general of the United Nations in Haiti, said in a statement Thursday. "If this situation continues, more and more desperate patients awaiting care are at risk of dying; more and more Haitians in desperate need of access to preventive care may fall victim to the epidemic."

This message was echoed by the director of the Pan-American Health Organization, Mirta Roses. "The situation of violence and insecurity now threatens to severely limit our success," she said. "We understand the frustration of many Haitians because of the tragic situation that has developed, but emergency medical personnel is equally important to save lives as the rescue teams were after the earthquake."

Aid organizations and even elements of the UN itself, however, have increasingly denounced the failure of the UN and the major powers to provide anywhere near the aid that is needed to confront the combined calamities of the earthquake's devastation and the cholera outbreak.

Imogen Wall, spokeswoman for the UN humanitarian agency OCHA, told the Reuters news agency that only $5 million of the $164 million for which the UN had issued an emergency appeal to fight the cholera epidemic has been forthcoming.

"The response is completely inadequate and in this situation where we are against the clock we urgently need support if we are going to save lives," said Wall. "We don't have what we need to do it. … Cholera is a race against time. If we can get to people, and if we have what we need, we should be saving lives."

The OCHA spokeswoman said that the outbreak of cholera, coming on top of the crisis confronting some 1.3 million Haitians living under tents and tarps since the January earthquake, has stretched the agency to the breaking point.

"Basically, we are running two emergencies," said Wall. "We cannot neglect the earthquake survivors because we have cholera."

The aid group Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) issued a similar statement on Friday. "Critical shortfalls in the deployment of well established measures to contain cholera epidemics are undermining efforts to stem the ongoing cholera outbreak in Haiti," warned the agency, which has set up more than 20 cholera treatment facilities throughout Port-au-Prince, in the Artibonite region, and in the north of Haiti.

"Despite the huge presence of international organizations in Haiti, the cholera response has to date been inadequate in meeting the needs of the population," the organization said.

Stefano Zannini, MSF head of mission in Haiti, added, "More actors are needed to treat the sick and implement preventative actions, especially as cases increase dramatically across the country. There is no time left for meetings and debate—the time for action is now."

MSF facilities have been increasingly overrun with Haitians seeking treatment for cholera. The number of people seeking treatment at centers run or supported by the aid group rose from 350 for the week ending November 7 to 2,250 cases for the week ending November 14.

The failure of the UN, Washington and the other major powers to provide adequate aid to halt the deadly spread of the cholera epidemic in Haiti compounds the criminal neglect of the country in the aftermath of January's 7.0 earthquake.

Despite the outpouring of sympathy and donations from millions of ordinary people, more than 10 months after the quake, next to nothing has been done to rebuild Haiti and provide the kind of basic infrastructure that could have protected its people from cholera and other deadly diseases.

As of September, only 15 percent of the aid promised to Haiti in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake had reached the country. Washington, which bears the greatest historic responsibility for the dire conditions in Haiti, has yet to disburse one penny of the $1.5 billion that it pledged.

A survey conducted by several advocacy groups eight months after the earthquake found that virtually no one made homeless by the disaster has been moved to new, permanent housing. Among the atrocious conditions prevailing in the tent camps is a lack of access to clean water and adequate sanitation, creating conditions for cholera to claim many more victims.

The study found that "potable water was only available to residents who could pay for it." As a result, "44 percent of families primarily drank untreated water." It also found that only 69 percent of people in the camps had access to latrines or pit toilets, and that these were overcrowded, unsafe and unclean, posing a threat of infection.

Aid officials acknowledge that given these conditions, cholera will plague Haiti for a long time to come. "The epidemic is not going to go away," said the UN humanitarian coordinator Nigel Fisher. "It is almost impossible to stop."

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