

UN admits role in 2010 cholera outbreak in Haiti

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19 August 2016

The office of United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has acknowledged that the UN “peacekeeping” forces deployed to Haiti were responsible for the outbreak of a cholera epidemic there, the first appearance of the disease in Haiti in more than a century.

The deputy spokesman for the secretary general, Farhan Haq, said in an email to the press, “over the past year, the U.N. has become convinced that it needs to do much more regarding its own involvement in the initial outbreak and the suffering of those affected by cholera.”

According to a report Thursday in the *New York Times*, this statement was prompted by a confidential report to Ban by UN adviser Philip Alston, a New York University law professor serving as a special rapporteur on human rights. His report, delivered August 8, concluded that the cholera epidemic “would not have broken out but for the actions of the United Nations.”

The United Nations Office of Internal Oversight and Services (OIOS) has quietly released an internal audit documenting that as recently as September 2015, the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) continued to use unsafe practices for disposing of sewage from its bases. Five years previously, in October 2010, cholera was introduced to Haiti for the first time in more than 100 years when sewage from a camp housing infected UN soldiers leaked into the Artibonite River.

The audit’s findings include the continued dumping of sewage into Haiti’s waterways for years after the epidemic began, the inadequate testing and maintenance of wastewater treatment plants, the refusal to clean up sites abandoned by UN troops, and a lack of inspection of private contractor practices. The OIOS did not research whether these practices led to any additional illness among Haitians.

On August 11 Fox News reported the release of the audit document by the OIOS. The document is dated June

30, 2015, but was marked as “withheld” by the UN until this summer. No reason has been given by the UN for delay or secrecy. While it is possible that the auditors were giving MINUSTAH time to write its Management Response (which is appended to the released document), no announcement was made at the time of release.

The epidemic, which began in October 2010, has killed more than 9,300 Haitians and sickened nearly 800,000, according to official estimates. The UN has continued to deny its responsibility in the face of overwhelming epidemiological evidence. The actual number of deaths is likely much higher than the official estimate because Haiti’s health system did not have the capacity to track the spread of the disease at first. In addition, rural peasants and the urban poor often were unable to obtain treatment, and therefore not included in the official count.

In a study conducted from March to May 2011, Doctors Without Borders (MSF) sampled 16,000 people each in two cities and two rural towns and found that the excess number of deaths above the standard rate was 3,406 during the first months of the epidemic. In contrast, the official number of cholera deaths during the study period, nation-wide, was 4,856.

The OIOS audit documents that during site visits to MINUSTAH facilities the auditors observed: overflow of black water (defined as containing human waste) from the holding tanks of two treatment plants, seepages of grey water (contaminated by laundry, dishwashing, or bathing) released into the surrounding environment at seven sites, and septic tank manholes without covers at some sites. MINUSTAH did not fully implement corrective procedures until April 2015.

When relocating its troops from bases, MINUSTAH left several sites in disgusting condition, telling the auditors that it might use them again in the future and would clean them before turning them back over to the landlords. Conditions included unclean toilets, a septic tank full of

black water, and holding tanks full of sewage at a wastewater treatment plant.

MINUSTAH's environmental policy required the testing of wastewater for fecal coliform bacteria, along with an 8-parameter test of water quality. As late as June 2014, 71 percent of the 32 wastewater treatment plants did not pass the 8-parameter test, which included biological oxygen demand, turbidity, and acidity. At seven sites visited by the audit committee, inadequately treated wastewater was being released into public canals. Wastewater downstream from six of the treatment plants still contained fecal coliform, which although not a serious health risk in itself does indicate the shoddiness of MINUSTAH's practices. As of June 30, 2015, the resulting audit recommendation was left open until MINUSTAH provided evidence that it was actually implementing its standard operating procedures.

Corrective action on one of the most serious issues was not fully implemented until September 2015. The auditors reviewed the practice of an unnamed waste disposal vendor with whom MINUSTAH contracted. The results were damning: spillage from "inappropriate" trucks, non-compliance with health and safety standards, and disposal of garbage at unauthorized dumping sites. At least seven of these sites were "without protections from intrusion," and one was "very close to a water body used by the local population." MINUSTAH continued using this contractor until June 30, 2014, and then suspended them for a year. The contract did not include a no-notice inspection clause, and MINUSTAH told the auditors that inadequate staffing in its Engineering Division had kept it from carrying out inspections.

The OIOS audit's release follows an April 2016 article in *The Guardian* about a leaked report, commissioned by the UN in November 2010, which found that one in 10 UN bases were dumping black water—defined as water containing human waste—"directly into local environment." The researchers of this report, led by UN official Melva Crouch, estimated that the cost of preventing the cholera outbreak through proper sewage treatment in the fall of 2010 would have been only \$3.15 million. MINUSTAH's budget for occupying Haiti with thousands of soldiers and police was more than 100 times that amount in its most recent fiscal year.

Cholera was reintroduced to Haiti in October 2010 by UN soldiers from Nepal when sewage from their base leaked into the Artibonite River by way of its Meye Tributary. Less than a year after the epidemic began, the American Society for Microbiology journal *mBio*

published a genetic analysis documenting that the Haitian and Nepalese strains were identical. One of the UN's own experts commented that the study was "irrefutable molecular evidence" that MINUSTAH soldiers were responsible for the outbreak.

Nonetheless, the United Nations and its Secretary General Ban Ki-moon have refused to acknowledge MINUSTAH's guilt or offer compensation to the victims. In an October 2015 letter to Ban, a UN Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in Haiti and four Special Rapporteurs wrote that the refusal to hear victims' claims "undermines the reputation of the United Nations, calls into question the ethical framework within which its peace-keeping forces operate, and challenges the credibility of the Organization as an entity that respects human rights."

After questioning the UN's legal basis for refusing to hear victims' claims, the letter's five signatories complained that "various commentators" are worried that a successful cholera law suit would "open the floodgates to claims against the United Nations in other situations," threatening both its finances and its ability to maintain a pretence of "peacekeeping."

In reality, MINUSTAH has been used to subjugate the Haitian population ever since its establishment after the 2004 coup d'état against Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Behind the word "peacekeeping," the imperialist powers are keeping the UN force in place until they are satisfied that the Haitian National Police and recently re-formed military will be capable of taking over this job.

Similarly, the OIOS auditors worried in their report about "reputational risks" and the "risk of MINUSTAH being held accountable for water contamination coming from public canals that may have been contaminated from outside sources and for which MINUSTAH was not responsible."



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