

Protesters Shot Dead as Haiti Cholera Toll Tops 1,000

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Haiti remains tense in the wake of Monday's violent clashes between protesters and United Nations troops that left at least two dead and 16 wounded in Cap-Haitien, the country's second largest city.

The port city, approximately 300 kilometers north of the capital of Port-au-Prince, was still largely paralyzed on Tuesday, with schools, public offices and businesses shut, streets blocked by barricades of burning tires and sporadic gunfire reported. The bridge leading to the city's airport was blocked with welded metal barriers.

The United Nations sent a contingent of Spanish troops to reinforce its garrison in Cap-Haitien.

Violence erupted on Monday after thousands of demonstrators took to the city's streets to protest against the UN occupation force (known as MINUSTAH, for United Nations Stabilization Mission In Haiti), which many blame for the cholera epidemic that has now claimed more than 1,000 lives, and to denounce the government of Prime Minister Rene Preval for failing to adequately confront the spread of the disease.

The UN troops and Haitian police attempted to disperse the crowd with tear gas, setting off a stampede in which several people were injured. Demonstrators responded with a hail of rocks and, according to UN officials, gunfire. The troops fired on the crowd, killing one youth with a bullet through the back in Quartier Morin, just outside the city. Another man was shot to death in Cap-Haitien. The number of wounded was reportedly as high as 16, with several in serious condition.

The demonstrators set fire to a police station and to police cars and looted a food warehouse.

Smaller demonstrations were also reported in the towns of Hinche and Gonaïves, in the center and north of the country, as well as in the capital. In Hinche, a crowd of several hundred threw rocks at a Nepalese unit of UN troops, which has been widely blamed for the cholera outbreak.

Public health officials insist that it is difficult to determine with certainty how the bacteria was introduced into Haiti, which has not had any cases of cholera in a century. However, the outbreak began shortly after the arrival of the Nepalese battalion last month. Nepal has recently confronted its own cholera epidemic. Reporters visiting the troops' base found sanitation problems, with human waste being released into the Artibonite river. The area has been the epicenter of the cholera epidemic, which has been traced to the river's

contamination. Scientists at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, meanwhile, have confirmed that the strain of the bacteria is common to south Asia.

Suspicious that the UN troops introduced the deadly disease into Haiti have inflamed underlying resentments of the so-called peacekeeping force, which was deployed in Haiti in the aftermath of the US-orchestrated coup that overthrew President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and forced him into exile in 2004. Numbering some 12,000 troops, the Brazilian-led MINUSTAH is widely seen as an occupation force dedicated to suppressing popular unrest.

UN officials in Haiti attempted to dismiss the upheavals in Cap-Haitien as the work of political agitators seeking to destabilize the country in the run-up to national elections scheduled for November 28.

In a statement, MINUSTAH claimed, "The way the events unfolded suggests that these incidents were politically motivated, aimed at creating a climate of insecurity on the eve of the elections." The statement continued, "MINUSTAH calls on the population to remain vigilant and not let itself be manipulated by the enemies of stability and democracy in the country." The UN officials gave no indication as to the identity of these "enemies."

Popular outrage in Cap-Haitien and elsewhere in the country has been fueled by the rapid spread of cholera. Haiti Libre reported that "corpses of people who had died of cholera littered the streets of the city over the weekend." It quoted a Cap-Haitien city official as saying that "At least 20 bodies have been collected since Friday by the health authorities."

There were similar reports from Gonaïves, in the north of the country. "On Friday there were reports of around 30 people 'dropping dead' in the streets of Gonaïves," the British Independent reported. "The mayor is said to have joined residents in burying the dead, according to Jane Moyo of ActionAid. In rural areas surrounding the city, there were unconfirmed reports of whole families dying without any help, as local people shun the sick amid growing fear of the disease."

On Tuesday, Haiti's Ministry of Public Health and Population released its latest figures on the cholera toll, reporting that the number of dead had risen to 1,034 as of Sunday, with 16,799 people having been hospitalized.

It also confirmed that cholera is spreading in Port-au-Prince, with 875 people reported hospitalized and 38 dead in the metropolitan area. Health officials and aid agencies have expressed fear that the disease could prove uncontrollable in Port-au-Prince, where more than 1 million people remain homeless in squalid tent cities as a result of the earthquake that killed more than a quarter of a million Haitians last January.

However, according to the UN's humanitarian coordinator in Haiti, Nigel Fisher, the outbreak has been seen thus far more in the city's slums, like Cite Soleil, which have even less access to clean water and sanitation than the tent cities. "This does not mean that the camps will be spared," he warned.

In a videoconference with reporters, Fisher contradicted government officials, insisting that cholera has spread to all 10 of Haiti's departments (the government had claimed that 4 had not seen any cases). Referring to the demonstrations, he said that the disease had become a "national security" issue.

“The death toll will increase significantly, which will not be a surprise,” said the UN official. Many believe that the government’s official count of cholera cases and deaths is a significant underestimate, with many infections and deaths, particularly in the more backward rural areas, going unreported.

The UN has estimated that as many as 200,000 Haitians could contract the disease over the next several months. Health experts have warned that, given the conditions of extreme poverty and inadequate infrastructure in Haiti, the Western Hemisphere’s poorest nation, cholera will remain a problem for years to come.

Hospitals and aid organizations are already overwhelmed by the number of sick and dying. Many are asking what happened to the billions of dollars pledged by the US and other countries in the wake of the earthquake, only a fraction of which has ever reached the country. The UN has issued a fresh appeal for a paltry \$163.8 million in emergency funding to confront the current crisis.

“The situation is very alarming,” according to Stephane Reynier, director of operations for Doctors Without Borders. “MSF structures are over overrun by the number of patients, not just in Port-au-Prince, but nationally. We are fast and on the frontline but we cannot control a national epidemic alone. Where is the UN? Where are the NGOs? Where are the billions of dollars that were promised after the earthquake? There have been enough meetings, now we need action.”

Cholera, while highly contagious, is easily contained and easily cured under conditions in which there is ready access to clean water, sanitary facilities and medical care. For the vast majority of Haiti’s impoverished population, however, these conditions are out of reach.

According to a 2008 study, only 41 percent of Haiti’s population have access to latrines, and only about half have access to safe water. At least 71 percent are without access to clean water at least some of the time. In the countryside, conditions are far worse. In Artibonite, the center of the epidemic, less than a third enjoy either clean water or adequate sanitation.

These conditions obviously preexisted the devastating earthquake last January. In 2008, Partners in Health, a Boston-based NGO, together with other aid groups, issued a report entitled “The Denial of the Right to Water in Haiti,” which stated:

“Widespread lack of access to clean water ranks as one of Haiti’s most significant obstacles when it comes to meeting basic human rights standards. Historical legacies of inequality, disempowered or corrupt governance and persistent levels of extreme poverty have all contributed to the Haitian government’s systemic inability to deliver clean water to its people. Lack of access to this crucial resource continues to impact all aspects of life for the vast majority of Haitians, contributing to poor health, food shortages, and diminished educational opportunities. The result: a vicious cycle of contaminated water consumption, ineffective public hygiene, persistent health crises, and—beneath it all—chronic and deeply embedded poverty.”

The report indicted the United States and the Democratic administration of President Bill Clinton for sabotaging Inter-American Development Bank loans destined for the country’s water infrastructure and distribution systems. The Clinton administration sought to block the money as part of an effort to destabilize Haiti’s government and bring to power a regime more subservient to Washington’s interests in the region.

In the intervening decade, conditions have only deteriorated further, as US policy has sought to subordinate the country's development to investments by multinational companies seeking cheap labor, while trying to placate social unrest through the deployment of a myriad of NGOs and aid organizations. A weak and corrupt central government has done next to nothing to develop the country's infrastructure, leaving the Haitian people defenseless in the face of a succession of calamities, culminating in January's earthquake and the current cholera epidemic.

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