

Tripoli, Libya, 22 September 2023 – In the wake of catastrophic floods that had a devastating impact on Libya's east coast, the World Health Organization (WHO) is taking swift action to assist affected communities. WHO is supporting urgent efforts to restore access to health care and control the spread of infectious diseases, especially among the tens of thousands of people who have been displaced and are now living in shelters.

“The magnitude of this catastrophe is staggering,” said Dr Ahmed Zouiten, WHO Representative in Libya. “The need for swift, unified action cannot be overstated. We are collaborating closely with our partners, national authorities and the international community to deliver vital aid, save lives and reinstate essential health care services during this profoundly challenging period.”

A United Nations interagency team has assessed the affected areas and identified four priorities: providing clean water, preventing disease outbreaks, restoring primary health care services and establishing mental health and psychosocial support for survivors.

Devastating impact and public health risks

Since the disaster struck on 10 September 2023, 4014 people have been reported killed and over 8500 remain missing. Search and rescue teams have managed to dig 452 survivors out from the rubble of collapsed buildings. Between 30 000 and 35 000 people displaced by the floods are currently residing in overcrowded camps and settlements in Derna governorate, where they have limited access to clean water and sanitation.

Most of the health risks for flood survivors stem from the presence of contaminated water and poor hygiene and sanitation facilities. Risks include the threat of waterborne disease outbreaks such as acute watery diarrhoea and cholera, and vector-borne disease outbreaks such as typhoid fever, dengue, malaria and yellow fever.

These challenges are compounded by disrupted health care services, especially for vulnerable groups such as children, women and patients with chronic disease.

Tens of thousands of people have lost loved ones, homes, livelihoods and all their belongings,

putting them at significant risk of acute mental distress.

Assessment of health facilities

WHO has rapidly assessed 78 health facilities (24 hospitals and 54 primary health care facilities). More than half were reported as either being closed or not functioning due to damaged infrastructure and shortages of staff, medicines, supplies and equipment. The districts of Derna, Al-Jabal Al-Akhdar and Al-Marj were among the worst hit.

Restoring functionality and relief measures

The Libyan Ministry of Health (MoH) and WHO are working to restore functionality in 10 health facilities and establish six field hospitals. A 100-bed field hospital with 10 intensive care beds, radiology services and an obstetrics and gynecology department has been set up in Derna. In Assahel city in Al-Jabal Al-Akhdar, WHO has deployed a mobile clinic to serve Al-Bayada village, where the only rural hospital has been damaged and forced to close. WHO has also provided chronic disease medicines to primary health care centres in Al-Bayda, Al-Marj, Derna, Shahat and Sousa.

Mental health support

On 21 September, a team from WHO headed by Dr Ahmed Zouiten, the WHO Representative in Libya, met with the health authorities in Derna to review the most urgent needs. Mental health and psychosocial support services will be prioritized for the affected communities, with services ranging from “psychological first aid” through the primary care system to specialized psychiatric care for the deeply traumatized people. WHO has intensified efforts to deploy trained mental health professionals and resources. Beyond addressing immediate physical threats, these specialists will focus on helping survivors deal with loss, anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorders.

Environmental challenges

The environmental situation remains challenging with the proliferation of disease vectors such as flies and mosquitoes. Stagnant water, particularly in Al-Makhili, Derna and Soussa, is a breeding ground for mosquitoes and creates conditions conducive to the spread of malaria and waterborne diseases. According to the Libyan National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), 238 cases of diarrhoea were reported between 14 and 18 September 2023.

Disease surveillance

The NCDC is leading disease surveillance efforts with support from WHO. This includes active surveillance in hospitals, health facilities and shelters for displaced people so that possible outbreaks may be detected early and control measures launched immediately.

Community engagement and information sharing

WHO is actively engaging with affected communities to communicate the main health risks following the floods and explain how people can help protect themselves against water- and foodborne diseases. Awareness campaigns by WHO and health partners have emphasized the dangers of drinking water from unknown sources and promoted the use of bottled water. Health education leaflets have been distributed to raise awareness of how communities can protect themselves against diseases such as malaria, hepatitis A, dengue, typhoid and cholera. WHO has also explained how people can help other survivors by providing basic psychological first aid.

WHO continues to communicate the above information through the MoH, NCDC and WHO-run social media platforms and local media outlets.

International support and funding

WHO has allocated US\$2.3 million from its Contingency Fund for Emergencies to help fund the immediate response. WHO has appealed for another US\$11.1 million in the recently issued United Nations Flash Appeal. The Central Emergency Response Fund and the Government of Germany have pledged US\$3 million and US\$1 million, respectively.

Coordination

On 21 September 2023, WHO and the MoH convened the second meeting of health partners and donors to discuss the coordination of the health response.

For more information on WHO's response to the Libyan flood disaster, please visit: <https://www.emro.who.int/lby/floods/index.html>

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