

Islamabad, 30 August, 2010 – The World Health Organization is establishing diarrhoeal treatment centres throughout flood-ravaged Pakistan, a key intervention by the humanitarian health sector as it strives to protect people against epidemic-prone acute waterborne diseases, reduce excess deaths and restore routine health care services.

According to new data issued 29 August, 500 635 people are recorded to have been treated have been treated for the various forms of diarrhoeal disease, ranging from acute watery diarrhoea, bloody diarrhoea (shigella) and milder variations. This number represents 13% of the 3.7 million people recorded to have been treated between 29 July and 26 August. On 26 August alone, 19 178 cases of acute diarrhoea were reported.

Dr Hussein Gezairy, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, has warned against the increased risk of diarrhoeal diseases in the flood-stricken areas, pointing that this increase is due to there being no, or a lack of, access to safe water for flood-affected people, as well as poor sanitation and compromised hygiene and living conditions that millions displaced by the floods are forced to live in.

"More than 60 diarrhoeal treatment centres are operational or are in the process of being established in 46 of the most affected districts. USAID and the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance is funding the establishment of these centres, which are being operated by nongovernmental organization partners and Pakistani health authorities". He added "The terrible scale of this disaster has shocked the entire world, and the increasing trend of diarrhoeal diseases remains a grave concern to the humanitarian community," says Dr Guido Sabatinelli, WHO's Representative to Pakistan. "The current situation remains a major threat to public health. If the current poor environmental and hygiene situation in affected areas does not improve, coupled with limited availability of safe drinking water and the need for better access to health services, the risk is we may see more potentially fatal diarrhoeal and other acute waterborne diseases cases in coming days." Diarrhoeal diseases are not the only public health risks facing Pakistan's flood-affected people.

Acute respiratory infections, hepatitis A and E, malaria and skin infections are among multiple health threats that have already sickened hundreds of thousands of people.

The combination of challenges preventing many people reaching health care is worrisome,

requiring health providers to intensify efforts both to deliver health services directly to those who need it and find alternative means, such as by air, to reach communities isolated by floodwaters.

"More than 400 hospitals and clinics have been damaged by this disaster, destroying in the blink of an eye services that have been built up over 60 years. And the worst is not over yet," Dr Sabatinelli says. "The waters could remain for weeks, and the damage caused will remain even longer. The humanitarian community has a monumental task to protect the health of so many vulnerable people. And this will require sustained international support." WHO and Health Cluster partners have sought US\$ 56.2 million to conduct life-saving health programmes in the Pakistan Initial Floods Emergency Response Plan 2010 launched 9 August.

So far, just 43% has been covered by pledges or commitments for the plan, which covers relief efforts for the first 90 days of the emergency. WHO has delivered to healthcare providers supplies capable of treating 2.6 million people since the crisis started to treat a range of illnesses, including diarrhoea.

"More funding is urgently needed to deliver health services to extremely vulnerable communities now, and sustained support will be needed in the months ahead as well as Pakistan tries to rebuild its health system for the future," Dr Sabatinelli says.

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