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Emergency humanitarian aid to combat the cholera epidemic in North Iraq WHO provides aid for the cholera victims

Amman/Geneva - The World Health Organization (WHO) is supporting the Iraq Ministry of Health in responding to an ongoing outbreak of cholera in the northern part of the country. WHO is working hands in hand with the ministry and other partners to provide life-saving medical supplies, diarrhoeal disease kits, and technical assistance to streamline reporting, strengthening of surveillance systems and cholera outbreak investigation training.

The cholera outbreak has so far claimed 10 lives in the provinces of Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk while three provinces – Sulaymaniyah, Kirkuk and Erbil have reported laboratory confirmed cases of cholera. There has been a sharp increase in reported cases of diarrhoeal disease in the three northern governorates since mid-August. *Vibrio cholerae*, the bacterium responsible for the disease, has been isolated from the stool specimen of 1055 diarrhoeal disease cases so far. *V. cholera* can be fatal if untreated. So far, the outbreak has been concentrated in the northern region of Iraq with a population of more than 3 million people. Between from 23 August and 10 September, at least 6000 people have been reported with diarrhoeal diseases in Sulaymaniyah, almost 7000 in Kirkuk province and on since 6 September, the outbreak has spread to Erbil province causing at least 3000 cases.

The first case of cholera was reported from Kirkuk province on 14 August. From 3-9 September, trends in both Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk were increasing, with respectively 3007 cases reported from Sulaymaniyah and 1433 in Kirkuk that week only. The spread of the outbreak to Erbil is too recent to define a trend.

A UN mission led by Dr Naeema Al-Gasseer, the WHO Representative for Iraq, has been working with the government to coordinate the response in the affected areas since the end of August. The UN team has provided technical advice to the local public health authorities and worked to help identify the source of the outbreak, including inspecting water sources in Sulaymaniyah, Erbil and Baghdad. The team has also briefed senior officials and worked to mobilize resources to support ongoing public health containment measures in the affected areas and provide technical advice. WHO is coordinating the health response and working closely with other UN agencies, including UNICEF, UNDP as well as the International Committee of the Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières.



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WHO Representative meeting with Erbil Governors Medical assistances arrived to Kurdistan region

WHO in Iraq is actively involved in the containment of this outbreak, working with the health authorities of the affected areas to provide technical support for risk assessment, strengthening the surveillance system for diarrhoeal disease, improving water and sanitation, strengthening coordination and information flow, standardizing clinical case management, mobilizing medical and other essential supplies, and implementing social mobilization and health education campaigns. All public water supply systems in the affected districts have been chlorinated by the provincial authorities. In addition, water samples from the public water supply sources are being collected and tested routinely to ensure they meet potable water safety standards.

With support from WHO, the provincial health authority has actively started collecting quality surveillance data on cases reported to the health centers and hospitals as the surveillance system for diarrhoeal diseases was previously weak.

Although the source of infection in the three provinces is so far unconfirmed, the primary investigation indicated that the source of infection in Sulaymaniyah may have been polluted water that residents were forced to rely on because of a shortage of drinking water. In Kirkuk, cracked water pipes had allowed contamination by sewage, and geographical proximity allowed the outbreak to spread to Erbil.

Dr Al-Gasseer warned that delays in ensuring access to safe water, safe food and enhanced hygiene practices with active investigations about the current cases combined with the lack of sanitation could lead to further spread of cholera. She has urged the officials to provide full logistic and security support to the surveillance teams “

WHO has pre-positioned 10 Interagency Diarrhoeal Disease kits in order to ensure that adequate quantities of essential drugs, medical and laboratory supplies are available. In



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addition, two truck loads of Intravenous fluids (IV) , antibiotics, IV cannulae and other essential supplies purchased by WHO-Iraq office were delivered to Erbil.

WHO has also conducted a series of training sessions on case management, surveillance, laboratory diagnosis as well as on water quality testing for improved response to the ongoing outbreak. Dr Al-Gasseer met with the President of Iraq, the President and Prime Minister of Kurdistan and the health Ministers in Baghdad and in the north to seek the highest level of political commitment to fight this outbreak and helped to mobilize US\$1 million to support the ongoing emergency response operations.



Medical assistances arrived to Kurdistan region



WHO Representative meeting with Sulaymaniah Governors

Dr Al-Gasseer stressed the urgent need to take adequate steps to contain the current outbreak completely in Iraq. "The provision of safe water and sanitation is a formidable challenge but remains the critical factor in reducing the impact of the current outbreak. There is also a need for concerted efforts from all stockholders in leading a comprehensive multisectoral approach. Cholera control and prevention is not an issue to be dealt by the health sector alone. The communities need to be involved. They need to have access to safe water and sanitation, safe food and follow personal hygienic practices especially proper hand washing will hold the key in controlling this present outbreak .

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