23 March 2016, Baghdad, Iraq – After the declaration of a cholera epidemic in Iraq in September 2015, and in anticipation of a potential new outbreak, WHO, UNICEF and the Ministry of Health of Iraq, jointly with water and sanitation and health cluster partners held a consultation today to review lessons learnt and best practices from the successful 2015 response to the outbreak. Consultations such as these will help guide cholera contingency plans for 2016 and beyond.

Cholera outbreaks occur in Iraq about every 3 to 5 years and have a distinct seasonality that typically start in September and continue through December when cases naturally decline with a high probability of another outbreak the following spring. However, immediate and efficient response actions can reduce cases and save lives.

“The cholera outbreak response in 2015 put in place rapid life-saving interventions that helped minimize the epidemic. We need to take stock of what was done, and use this opportunity to design a comprehensive preparedness and response plan for the next outbreak,” said acting WHO Representative for Iraq Mr Altaf Musani. “WHO remains committed to supporting the Ministry of Health and health cluster partners with effective cholera prevention and control measures, including pre-positioning stockpiles of essential medicines and medical supplies and capacity for laboratory testing. These best practices will be important in averting mortality and morbidity when cholera strikes again,” Mr Musani explained.

The meeting focused on a number of key issues, including the need to:

- build local capacities to scale up surveillance, case investigation and management, as well as cholera prevention and control measures
- strengthen laboratory capacities at central, governorate, and peripheral levels to ensure early detection and confirmation of a cholera outbreak
- enhance collaborative activities between relevant ministries and agencies, with clear roles and accountability
- maintain strong and regular communication with the health sector and apply an intersectoral approach for the management of cholera/acute watery diarrhoea.

“The Ministry of Health with the support of WHO, UNICEF, and water and sanitation and health cluster partners is building a comprehensive cholera prevention and response programme with high capacity to respond to and contain any future public health risks, including a potential
cholera outbreak in 2016,” said Dr Adila Hammoud Minister of Health of Iraq. “We are going to benefit from the successful collaborative efforts the ministry had with WHO and partners during the last cholera outbreak, which spread to almost all Iraqi governorates,” Dr Hammoud added.

“UNICEF and partners, such as WHO and Ministry of Health, reacted immediately when cholera was confirmed in Iraq in 2015, and within 48 hours of the announcement we began our joint response. Initial activities empowered communities to protect themselves by knowing how to avoid and treat cholera, while intensive water and sanitation programmes took away the cholera transmission routes. With these joint efforts, by December 2015, even with over 10 million people from all over the world converging in Karbala, and with over 3 million people internally displaced, the outbreak was over,” said Peter Hawkins, UNICEF Iraq Country Representative.

Cholera is endemic in Iraq, and the outbreak, officially declared in September 2015, resulted in 4945 cases confirmed in 17 of the 18 governorates across Iraq. WHO and UNICEF supported the Ministry of Health and other partners to put in place immediate preventive and control measures that included targeting approximately 249,319 people with oral cholera vaccine in a 2-round immunization campaign for vulnerable populations in 62 refugee and internally displaced persons camps and collective centres throughout the country.

Related link

Read more about cholera

For more information please contact:

Ms Ajyal Sultany
Communications Officer
World Health Organization Iraq
+964 (0) 7510 101 469
sultanya@who.int

Jeffrey Bates
Chief of Communications
UNICEF Iraq