Baghdad 2 November 2018 – On 12 August 2018, an outbreak of gastrointestinal illnesses was detected in Basra, which is believed to have resulted from widespread water supply problems. Various gastrointestinal symptoms, such as abdominal pain, cramps, vomiting, and nausea, gas/bloating, diarrhoea, and fever, were reported. The Ministry of Health (MOH), Directorate of Health (DOH) in Basra, and the World Health Organization (WHO), in collaboration with other health authorities at the governorate and national level, swiftly responded by conducting investigations and implementing immediate public health control measures.

To keep the public abreast of our efforts, the Ministry of Health and WHO informs the public that the Ministry of Health has tested more than 10 000 samples of stool specimens in its laboratories. While several microorganisms that are often associated with waterborne and foodborne diseases were found, it is important to note that cholera has NOT been detected. Similarly, additional stool and water samples were tested at a WHO Collaborating Center, and cholera was not found. Thus the event in Basra was NOT caused by Vibrio cholerae. The number of cases increased over the first 3 weeks of the outbreak, peaking at the end of August 2018, and thereafter has declined significantly to slightly higher than normal levels by at mid-October 2018.

This decline is a result of immediate public health interventions put in place by Basra Directorate of Health with the support of MOH, WHO and other partners. These include:

- Provision of free treatment to patients who reported to the health facilities;
- Deployment of additional health workers from neighbouring governorates to cope with the increased number of patients seeking treatment;
- Heightened community awareness and media campaigns on safe use and handling of water,
- Height water quality monitoring in liaison with the Basra water department;
- Provision of medical supplies to treat patients;
- Prepositioned cholera kits in Basra in preparation of any potential outbreak; and
- Trained health workers on case management and laboratory investigation.

As of 15 October 2018, the MOH reported over 104 599 cumulative cases of gastrointestinal illnesses. Of these, 10 842 offered stool for investigation.
Despite the efforts to contain this outbreak, there remains a concern that the health of the people in Basra will continue to be affected unless the water situation improves drastically and quickly.

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