



Efforts have been stepped up to improve public health preparedness to mitigate the risk of cholera and other epidemic diarrhoeal diseases throughout the country, particularly in areas where large numbers of unregistered Syrian refugees are living in overcrowded conditions. Beirut, 9 July 2014 – WHO has stepped up epidemic preparedness efforts in Lebanon in view of increased risk of cholera and other epidemic diarrhoeal diseases during the summer months.

The ongoing conflict in Syria has displaced over 1.1 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon who are officially registered with the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In addition, it is estimated that over 500 000 Syrian refugees remain unregistered in Lebanon and live in crowded informal (tent) settlements in relatively impoverished areas of the country with poor environmental and sanitary conditions.

The huge increase in the number of Syrian refugees has overstretched the water and sanitation, housing and health care systems in Lebanon. The overcrowded living and environmental sanitation conditions of the informal tent settlements, as well as limited access of these refugees to health care, have increased the risk of diarrhoeal disease outbreaks among this refugee population. The risk is further accentuated as the country is expected to face a severe water shortage this summer, particularly in the areas where the unregistered Syrian refugees are living, due to the unusually low precipitation during the past winter. An early rainy season may also amplify the seasonal occurrence of diarrhoeal diseases in the country.

As part of improving public health preparedness for cholera and other epidemic-prone diarrhoeal diseases among the Syrian refugees living in informal settlements, a technical assessment mission was recently conducted by the Regional Office in Lebanon. The WHO mission members conducted a rapid field assessment in two of the largest and accessible informal settlement for Syrian refugees, in the Bekaa and Sidon areas of Lebanon. The WHO mission also reviewed the national preparedness plans and advised the government on concrete steps to mitigate the risks of diarrhoeal disease epidemics among the Syrian refugees

in terms of immediate, short-term and medium-term measures.

The WHO mission was particularly concerned about the sanitary conditions of the informal settlements of Syrian refugees where the field assessments were conducted and concluded that the risk of introduction of *Vibrio cholerae* and/or any other epidemic diarrhoeal disease pathogens and their spread across the country is real, owing to considerable population movement between these settlements hosting high number of displaced Syrian refugees with limited access to health care and other lifeline services.

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