Diarrhoeal treatment capacity increasing in Pakistan, but sustained support needed

30 August, 2010 | ISLAMABAD -- 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 water-borne diseases, reduce excess deaths and restore routine health care services.

According to new data issued 29 August, 500 635 people are recorded as having been treated for the various forms of diarrhoeal disease, ranging from acute watery diarrhoea and bloody diarrhoea (Shigella) to milder variations. This number represents 13% of the 3.7 million people recorded as having 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. He pointed out that this increase is due to the lack or absence of access to safe water for the people affected by the floods, as well as to the poor sanitation and to the compromised hygiene and living conditions in which the millions displaced by the floods are forced to live. "More than 60 diarrhoeal treatment centres (DTCs) 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 are 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 in diarrhoeal diseases remains a grave concern to the humanitarian community", said Dr Guido Sabatinelli, WHO Representative in 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, together with availability of safe drinking-water and access to health services, then the risk is that we may see more potentially fatal cases if diarrhoeal and other acute water-borne diseases in the 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 affected hundreds of thousands of people.

The combination of challenges preventing many people reaching health care is worrying, requiring health providers to intensify efforts, both to deliver health services directly to those who need it, and to 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", said Dr Sabatinelli. "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. Since the crisis started, WHO has delivered to health care providers supplies capable of treating 2.6 million people for a range of illnesses, including diarrhoea.

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

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