

Amid cholera outbreak in north-east Nigeria, UN steps up aid, warns pregnant women most vulnerable

26 September 2017 – Large-scale displacement and a health system in tatters as a result of persistent violence by the Boko Haram terrorist group have left many – most worryingly, pregnant women and their unborn babies – vulnerable to cholera in the wake of an outbreak in August, the United Nations Population Fund ([UNFPA](#)) has warned.

“Studies show that [cholera](#) infections during pregnancy can lead to sudden loss of the foetus, premature delivery, stillbirth and an increased mortality and morbidity, both for the baby and the mother,” said Homsuk Swomen, a UNFPA reproductive health specialist in Maiduguri, north-eastern Nigeria, one of the worst affected areas by the Boko Haram violence.

Due to the ongoing conflict, many pregnant women are malnourished, aggravating their vulnerability to cholera and the consequences if they fall ill.

Furthermore, the “traditional role” played by women and girls in the region is making them all the more susceptible to the disease.

According to Sylvia Opinia, a UNFPA expert in gender issues, it is usually women and girls who care for sick family members, clean latrines, fetch and handle untreated water, and prepare food for the family.

“We need to understand that [cholera is not gender neutral](#),” she underscored.

On its part, the UN agency is working with local health staff, community and social workers in the camps to impress upon them the need to include women and girls in education messages on the disease, and especially targeting pregnant women with those messages. It is also engaging health workers to identify vulnerable women and girls, including pregnant women, for referral to appropriate care.

But funds are needed.

Last Sunday, the UN and partners [launched a \\$9.9 million appeal](#) to respond to the current outbreak in Borno state (north-east Nigeria) and to prevent further outbreaks in high-risk areas. A [Cholera Response and Prevention Plan](#) has been developed to address the immediate needs of 3.7 million people that could be affected by the outbreak.

In related news, the World Health Organization ([WHO](#)), the UN health agency, [concluded](#) an oral cholera vaccination campaign around Maiduguri this weekend, inoculating some 844,000 people in affected areas.

According to WHO, it takes those immunized about a week to develop the immune

response that should protect against the disease, and most individuals vaccinated should be protected for up to six months.

As of 25 September, 3,934 suspected cases of cholera including 54 deaths have been reported in and around Maiduguri. About 14 million people are affected by the crisis in north-eastern Nigeria (Adamawa, Borno and Yobe states), of whom 6.9 million need health assistance.