

Fresh Yemen hospital attack raises risk of new cholera epidemic

A deadly attack on one of the last functioning hospitals in Yemen in the key port city of Hudaydah has put hundreds of thousands of people at risk and damaged efforts to prevent a third cholera epidemic in the war-torn country, top UN officials warned on Friday.

Early reports suggest multiple deaths and injuries after Yemen's largest hospital, Al Thawra, was hit on Thursday, said Dr. Peter Salama, who is in charge of Emergency Preparedness and Response at the [World Health Organization](#).

"We're particularly saddened at [WHO](#) by the attack on one of the major hospitals in the country yesterday, Al Thawra in Al Hudaydah," he said. According to latest news reports, at least 20 have been killed by several air strikes, which also hit a fish market in the city.

The attack on the hospital – which houses a major cholera treatment centre – is the latest outrage in the fight to capture the key Red Sea port from Houthi opposition militia.

Everything that we are trying to do to stem the world's worst cholera epidemic is at risk – *Humanitarian Coordinator Lise Grande*

Yemen's conflict has its roots in uprisings that date back to 2011, but fighting escalated in March 2015, when an international coalition led by Saudi Arabia intervened militarily at the request of President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi. The coalition's objective was to secure the return of the Government to the Houthi-held capital, Sana'a.

The fighting is still raging and the ensuing humanitarian crisis has only deepened in a country that was already one of the world's poorest, with some eight million people believed to be on the brink of famine.

Sharing WHO's condemnation of the Hudaydah attack, [UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Yemen](#), Lise Grande, described the impact of the strikes as "appalling".

Hospitals are protected under international humanitarian law, the UN official insisted, adding that "hundreds of thousands of people" depend on the hospital to survive.

"Everything that we are trying to do to stem the world's worst cholera epidemic is at risk," Ms Grande said, noting that new cholera cases have been identified in the city "every day this week".

In a bid to prevent the disease spreading once again, WHO's Dr. Salama explained that combatants have been asked to down their weapons, so that an oral vaccination campaign can take place. More than 500,000 people are expected to receive the vaccine in a three-day operation beginning on Saturday.

"We have requested, as the UN, three days of tranquility, associated with, first, our cholera vaccine campaign across August 4, 5 and 6 in the north of the country," Dr. Salama said. "You will recall that we were able to start campaigns in the south of the country previously, but we've never before been able to do it in the north."

Asked to assess the level of risk from cholera, whose symptoms include watery diarrhea and fever, the WHO official said that the level of infection this year is "not at the same massive level" as last year.

Nonetheless, many people are far weaker than 12 months ago and far less able to cope with infection, he added.

"We've had two major waves of cholera epidemics in recent years," Dr. Salama said, "and unfortunately the trend data that we've seen in the last days to weeks suggest that we may be on the cusp of the third major wave of cholera epidemics in Yemen."

Conflict in new Ebola zone of DR Congo exacerbates complexity of response: WHO emergency response chief

"We know for example that there have been around 20 deaths," Dr. Peter Salama, Deputy Director General of Emergency Preparedness and Response, told journalists in Geneva.

"We can't at this stage confirm whether they are all confirmed or probable Ebola cases," he added. "We expect however that the overall case count will rise in coming days to weeks, based on the trajectory of epidemics at this stage in their development."

Speaking just over a week after the UN agency declared the last Ebola episode over, some 2,500 miles away to the west in DRC's Equateur province, Dr. Salama said that WHO was unaware of the public health emergency in North Kivu province at that point.

The bad news is that this strain of Ebola carries with it the highest case-fatality-rate of any of the strains of Ebola, anywhere

above 50 per cent and higher – *Dr. Peter Salama (WHO)*

The outbreak on the western side of the country in June, infected dozens, and led to 33 deaths, but despite several cases appearing in a major city on the Congo River, it was fully contained after a massive international and national response.

The top WHO official said that there was “no evidence” to suggest a link between the two outbreaks, although it appears “very likely” that they share the same deadly Zaire strain.

The death toll from the current Kivu episode is likely to rise, the WHO official said, adding that the alert was raised on 25 July after a woman and many members of her immediate family died after exhibiting symptoms consistent with Ebola.

“That event appears to have been a woman who was admitted to hospital around Beni, and on discharge had recovered from the original complaint”, he said. After leaving however, “she came down with a fever and other symptoms that were clinically consistent with Ebola, and later on, seven of her direct relatives also contracted the disease.”

Dr. Salama explained how longstanding conflict in Eastern DRC – involving more than 100 armed groups in the Kivu area and elsewhere – created an additional level of difficulty in trying to contain the deadly disease.

In the first week of February this year alone around Beni, [attacks displaced](#) more than 2,200, in addition to 1,500 displaced at the end of January. In the Djugu Territory to the south of North Kivu, inter-ethnic violence led nearly 30,000 to flee their homes to the provincial capital Bunia, at the beginning of the year.

“It’s going to be a very, very complex operation,” he said, noting that the vast country is home to the UN’s largest peacekeeping operation, the UN Stabilization Mission in the DR Congo (MONUSCO).

One million of the province’s eight million inhabitants are displaced and getting access to some of those in danger of coming into contact with Ebola, will require an armed escort in some cases, the WHO official explained.

There is also the additional threat that those fleeing violence may also head into nearby Uganda, Tanzania and Burundi, taking the infection with them, Dr. Salama said, noting that additional surveillance measures are being implemented at crossing points.

“On the scale of difficulty, trying to extinguish a deadly outbreak pathogen in a war zone” is at the top of the scale, he added.

In the most recent Ebola outbreak a key part of the emergency response involved tracing anyone who had come into contact with suspected carriers of

the disease. WHO staff could travel hundreds of miles on a motorbike to do this vital work, but this is likely to be much more difficult in view of the high level of insecurity in the Kivus.

One immediate priority is to confirm whether the latest outbreak involves the Zaire strain, since this can be treated with the same vaccine that was employed in Equateur province.

“It’s good news and it’s very bad news,” Dr. Salama said. “The bad news is that this strain of Ebola carries with it the highest case-fatality-rate of any of the strains of Ebola, anywhere above 50 per cent and higher, according to previous outbreaks. So, it’s the most-deadly variant of the Ebola virus strains that we have, that’s the bad news. The good news is that we do have – although it’s still an investigational product – a safe and effective vaccine, that we were able to deploy last time around.”

[UN to convene Yemen talks early next month in Geneva, envoy tells Security Council](#)

The United Nations Special Envoy for Yemen announced on Thursday that after two years of stalled talks on resolving the crisis in the country, he plans to invite the warring parties to Geneva on 6 September for a round of peace consultations.

“It is time long past for us, together, to call for an early resumption of the political process, two years since the last round in Kuwait,” said Martin Griffiths, referring to the UN-supported peace talks that were first held three years ago in Switzerland before shifting to Kuwait in April 2016.

Since the uprisings that broke out in Yemen in early 2011, the UN has been engaged in helping Yemenis to find a peaceful solution. However, on 26 March 2015, a coalition of countries led by Saudi Arabia intervened militarily at the request of President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi to secure the return of the Government to Sana’a, which had been seized by Houthi militias and allied units of the armed forces.

Three years on, the fighting is still raging, and the ensuing humanitarian crisis has only deepened in a country that was already one of the region’s poorest.

In the Council today, Mr. Griffiths said it is time to “begin the difficult and uncertain journey away from war” and that there is now a chance “to weigh the opportunities for peace” in the war-ravaged country.



UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

Martin Griffiths, UN Special Envoy for Yemen, delivers his remarks during the Security Council meeting on the situation in the Middle East.

Describing the ongoing the battle for Hudaydah, a port city on the Red Sea, as “the centre of gravity of the war”, he stressed that the gap between the two sides is being narrowed “in a way that nobody expected”. This issue, he said, “has a better chance of being resolved within the context of a comprehensive political settlement”.

He called on Council members to “urge the parties to resolve this conflict through negotiation rather than through military means”, explaining that he will invite the warring parties to Geneva on 6 September for a round of talks.

“These consultations will provide the opportunity for the parties, among other things, to discuss the framework for negotiations, relevant confidence-building measures and specific plans for moving the process forward,” said Mr. Griffiths, requesting the Council’s support.

Having engaged with the parties, as well as with civil society, Mr. Griffiths said he is especially grateful for his meetings with Yemeni women. “I continue to consult them on elements of the peace process. Their voices are a constant reminder that Yemeni families bear the brunt of this conflict.”

“We know what can work. We have talked to all the sides. We have studied the experience of past efforts to resolve this conflict. One hundred days in Kuwait is a valuable guide for us,” he insisted.

The Director of Operations for the UN [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) (OCHA), John Ging, also briefed the Council, painting a bleak picture of the situation on the ground.



UN Photo/Manuel Elias

John Ging, Director of the Coordination and Response Division of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, addresses the Security Council meeting on the situation in Yemen, 2 August 2018.

“You have heard the statistics many times: more than 22 million people – 75 per cent of the population – require humanitarian assistance and protection. Three years of conflict have left 2 million people displaced from their homes; 8.4 million people do not know where their next meal is coming from; and, the worst cholera outbreak in the world occurred in Yemen last year, with 1.1 million cases,” said Mr. Ging.

“The humanitarian situation is indeed shocking, both in scale and severity,” he stated.

“The toll of this conflict on civilians and civilian infrastructure is devastating. Incidents in which civilians are killed or injured continue to be reported with alarming regularity”, he said, calling all parties to “respect international humanitarian law, including the obligation to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure, and to take all feasible precautions to avoid and minimize incidental harm”.

Mr. Ging also paid tribute to the humanitarian organizations in Hudaydah who “stayed and delivered”, per their mandates. “About 90 per cent of people displaced by recent violence have, in fact, received emergency relief packages. These packages contain food, hygiene supplies and other supplies to reserve dignity,” OCHA’s Head of Operations explained.

“Humanitarian assistance – however effective and large-scale – cannot mitigate the destructive effect of conflict on every facet of daily life,” he stated. “The Yemeni people have suffered for too long and they have suffered too much. An end to this conflict is long overdue.”

Human rights experts denounce Trump's attacks against media

The United Nations expert on free expression has condemned President Donald Trump's repeated attacks on the press, warning that the US leader's rhetoric is eroding public trust in the media and could spark violence against journalists.

"His attacks are [strategic](#), designed to undermine confidence in reporting and raise doubts about verifiable facts," David Kaye, UN Special Rapporteur on [freedom of expression](#) and Edison Lanza, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, said in a joint statement on Thursday.

Mr. Trump has labelled the media as being the "enemy of the American people," "very dishonest" and "fake news," the statement said. Moreover, he has accused the press of distorting democracy and spreading conspiracy theories and blind hatred.

"These attacks run counter to the country's obligations to respect press freedom and international human rights law," the experts said, expressing concern that the attacks risk increasing targeted violence against journalists.

The experts stressed that over the course of his presidency, Mr. Trump and his administration have sought to undermine reporting that had uncovered fraud, abuse, potential illegal conduct and disinformation.

"Each time the President calls the media 'the enemy of the people' or fails to allow questions from reporters from disfavoured outlets," the experts continued, "he suggests nefarious motivations or animus." However, they pointed out that not even one time was he able to show any specific reporting that was driven by untoward motivations.

"It is critical that the US administration promote the role of a vibrant press and counter rampant disinformation," they underscored.

We stand with the independent media in the United States – *UN expert on freedom of expression*

To this end, they urged President Trump to not only "stop using his platform to denigrate the media" but to condemn the attacks, including press threats at his own rallies.

Affirming that media attacks go beyond Mr. Trump's language, they encouraged his administration, including the Justice Department, to "avoid pursuing

legal cases against journalists in an effort to identify confidential sources,” saying that it undermines the media’s independence and blocks the public from accessing information.

The experts also appealed to the Government to “stop pursuing whistle-blowers through the tool of the Espionage Act.”

“We stand with the independent media in the United States, a community of journalists and publishers and broadcasters long among the strongest examples of professional journalism worldwide,” they asserted. “We especially urge the press to continue, where it does so, its efforts to hold all public officials accountable.”

The experts encouraged all media to act in solidarity against the efforts of President Trump to favour some outlets over others.

“Two years is two years too much, and we strongly urge that President Trump and his administration and his supporters end these attacks,” they concluded.

Special Rapporteurs and independent experts are appointed by the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or a country situation. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.

[UN-backed meeting of African States targets terrorism, violent extremism](#)

Regional security topped the agenda of a United Nations-backed joint summit on Central and West Africa searching, among other things, for a practical approach to fighting terrorism.

In a statement issued on Thursday through his Deputy Spokesperson, Farhan Haq, [Secretary-General](#) António Guterres commended the Central and West African regions for the successful Joint Summit of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) on Peace, Security, Stability and the Fight against Terrorism and Violent Extremism, which took place on Monday in Lomé, Togo.

“The Secretary-General welcomes the [renewed commitment](#) of ECCAS and ECOWAS member States to strengthen cooperation on key peace and security challenges and is particularly encouraged by the decision to sign a Criminal Cooperation Agreement by the end of 2018 and to establish a ministerial committee to monitor implementation of the Summit decisions,” said Mr. Haq.

The UN chief also welcomed the decision of the Heads of State and Government

from the two regions to hold consultations in the margins of the African Union summit in January, “and to meet every two years to review implementation of the decisions contained in the Lomé Declaration adopted at the Joint Summit.”

“The Secretary-General reiterates the commitment of the United Nations to continue to promote inter-regional cooperation and support the implementation of the decisions adopted by the ECCAS-ECOWAS Summit,” the statement concluded.

A region on the edge

In July, Mohamed Ibn Chambas, the Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel ([UNOWAS](#)), updated the Security Council on the “[volatile security](#) situation.”

Citing the spillover of the Malian crisis into Burkina Faso and Niger, and the widespread violence by non-state armed groups throughout the region, he noted that “the complexity of recent attacks...has had a devastating impact on local communities.”

In mid-June, François Louncény Fall, the Special Representative and head of the UN Regional Office for Central Africa ([UNOCA](#)), told the Council that the scourge of terrorism and violent extremism continued to affect all Central Africa and [divert government resources](#) from development programmes to security operations.

“Boko Haram and the Lord’s Resistance Army have not stopped their deadly attacks on civilians, committing egregious human rights abuses and causing countless victims,” he said, referring to the main armed groups active in the sub-region.

In the Summit’s final communique, the Heads of State and Government committed to cooperate in conflict prevention, promoting peace and stability in both regions through establishing and strengthening early warning and rapid response crises mechanisms.

They also committed to strengthen cooperation on insecurity, with the ECOWAS Commission president and ECCAS Secretary General to negotiate among the regional States on procedures for mutual legal assistance and judicial cooperation.