

As Bubonic and Pneumonic plagues spread in Madagascar, UN health agency ramps up response

6 October 2017 – The United Nations health agency is rapidly scaling up its response to a plague outbreak in Madagascar that has spread to the capital and port towns, infecting more than 100 people in just a few weeks.

“WHO is concerned that plague could spread further because it is already present in several cities and this is the [start of the epidemic season](#), which usually runs from September to April,” said Charlotte Ndiaye, the World Health Organization ([WHO](#)) Representative in Madagascar in a news update.

Plague is a disease of poverty. It thrives in places with poor sanitary conditions and inadequate health services. It can kill quickly if left untreated, but can also be cured by common antibiotics if delivered early, according to WHO.

The Government of Madagascar has confirmed that the death of a Seychellois basketball coach visiting the nation for a sports event was due to pneumonic plague. He died in the hospital in Antananarivo on 27 September.

Health authorities are tracing people with whom he came in contact, thus exposing them, to administer antibiotics as a precautionary measure to prevent infection.

The incident brings the total number of dead to 21 since the outbreak was identified in late August while at least 114 others have been infected.

“Our teams are on the ground in Madagascar providing technical guidance, conducting assessments, supporting disease surveillance and engaging with communities,” Dr. Ndiaye explained.

Further deployments of WHO staff and response partners in the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network are underway, as well as increased supplies of antibiotics, personal protective equipment and other supplies.

“We are doing everything we can to support the Government’s efforts, including by coordinating health actors,” she added.

The Malagasy Red Cross is also [scaling-up community surveillance](#), contact tracing and communication in to stem the spread as it points out that the bubonic plague bacterium can travel to a person’s lungs, causing pneumonic plague, which can spread quickly from person to person through droplets in the air.

WHO has released \$300,000 in emergency funds, as well as critical medical supplies, to quickly scale up operational efforts, and is appealing for \$1.5 million to support the response.

Plague is endemic to Madagascar, where around 400 cases of – mostly bubonic – plague are reported annually. Contrary to past outbreaks, this one is affecting large urban areas, which increases the risk of transmission. The number of cases identified to date is higher than expected for this time of year.

Bubonic plague is spread by infected rats via flea bite while pneumonic is transmitted person-to-person. The current outbreak includes both forms of plague. Nearly half of the cases identified so far are of pneumonic plague.

The last reported outbreak in December 2016 was mainly bubonic plague occurring in remote area.

[Mali: Security Council urges parties to adopt timeline for implementing peace agreement](#)

6 October 2017 – The Security Council today expressed a deep concern over the persistent delays in fully implementing key provisions of the peace agreement between the Government of Mali and the *Plateforme* and *Coordination* armed groups, urging the parties to adopt an agreed-upon timeline for implementation.

In a press statement, the Council welcomed the signing on 20 September 2017 by the *Plateforme* and *Coordination* armed groups of a series of commitments, including an immediate, comprehensive and definitive cessation of hostilities, calling on the armed groups to strictly adhere to this commitment.

The 15-member body underscored the pressing need to deliver tangible and visible peace dividends to the population in the country's north and elsewhere to keep the momentum of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, signed in 2015.

The Council expressed its intention to dedicate a specific focus of its upcoming visit to the Sahel region to the implementation of the Agreement.

The Council urged all parties to comply with their obligations under applicable international law and to bring an end to all human rights violations and abuses, and encouraged the Government to continue its efforts to combat impunity, with the support of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali ([MINUSMA](#)).

Expressing a concern about the security situation in Mali and the threat posed by terrorism and transnational organized crime in the Sahel region, the

Council underlined that the efforts by the force of the Group of Five for the Sahel States to counter the activities of terrorist groups and other organized criminal groups will contribute to create a more secure environment in the region and help MINUSMA fulfil its mandate to stabilize the country.

[Join global treaty to root out the scourge of illegal fishing, urges UN food security agency](#)

6 October 2017 – Calling for strengthening the fight against illegal fishing, the United Nations food security agency has urged all countries to join a landmark global treaty that aims to rid the world of the multibillion-dollar scourge.

The Port State Measures Agreement ([PSMA](#)) – approved by the Conference of the Food and Agricultural Organization ([FAO](#)) in November 2009 – entered into force last June, making it legally binding on its parties to conduct rigorous inspections of vessels by port rather than flag States.

According to José Graziano da Silva, the Director-General of FAO, the PSMA is not only the “main tool” to tackle illegal fishing, it also helps to tackle other serious problems including trafficking of drugs and persons.

“We need all countries around the world to be part of the [the Agreement] for it to be highly effective,” he said, speaking at a conference in Malta.

So far about 50 countries are parties to the treaty, but many more are needed, added Mr. Graziano da Silva.

As part of its commitments to implement the Agreement, FAO has set aside seed money to fund support programmes for poorer countries develop their technical, scientific and legal capacity. These resources will be bolstered by voluntary contributions.

Also in his remarks, the FAO Director-General announced pledges of \$41.9 in funding initiatives for programs aimed at the fisheries sector, including improving fisheries management and livelihoods around the Mediterranean and the Black Sea.

With these funds FAO aims to reverse the trend of overexploitation of fish stocks and strengthen the livelihoods of poor coastal communities, which depend heavily on small-scale fishing.

The UN agency also announced today that it will spend some \$1 million to assist small island developing States through its [Blue Growth](#) initiative,

geared at providing developing countries with a framework which allows them to rebuild and grow their aquatic economies in a sustainable ecological manner while benefitting coastal communities.

[UN study tackles violence against women in Arab region using economic model](#)

6 October 2017 – An economic model to estimate the costs of intimate partner violence – the most common form of violence against women in the Arab world – was spotlighted this week at the United Nations regional commission, based in Beirut, Lebanon.

“Our ultimate goal has always been to translate the findings of our studies into practical projects with a view to empowering women and enhancing their position in society,” said Mohamed Ali Alhakim, the Executive Secretary of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia ([ESCWA](#)), which serves 18 Arab States.

According to the World Health Organization ([WHO](#)), 37 per cent of “ever married women” in the East Mediterranean region – which encompasses most Arab States – have experienced physical or sexual partner violence.

Speaking at the [opening](#) of ESCWA’s [Committee on Women](#), Dr. Alhakim noted that despite progress in developing national plans to address gender-based violence, Arab countries need to do more to end the grave violations still being perpetrated against women.

To support these efforts, ESCWA and [UN Women](#) developed a regional project to estimate the cost of violence against women and use the costings as an instrument for policy reform and advocacy.

“We aim to utilize it as an advocacy tool with policymakers to substantiate that if we work in a holistic manner to end violence against women, it will not only be the right thing to do, but it will also be the smart thing to do,” said Mohammad Naciri, the Director of UN-Women’s regional office in Egypt.

“My heart aches when we try to quantify [the violence] because the emotional and psychological scars that women and girls live with as a result of the violence exerted on them cannot necessarily be quantified,” he continued. “That’s why I said it’s a smart thing to do, but the right thing to remember is that it’s the absolute right of every single woman and girl to end the violence against them.”

According to UN-Women, the dire economic, political and security situation in many Arab countries fuels the problem given direct correlation between crises and domestic violence. During the last conflict in Gaza, intimate partner violence reportedly rose by 700 per cent due to feelings of hopelessness, humiliation, and lack of opportunities.

While the drivers of violence are not contested, there are multiple approaches to costing the phenomenon. The two main methods involve estimating the cost of inaction—measuring the direct and indirect, tangible and intangible costs of violence to survivors, their families, and the community, including missed paid or unpaid work; and estimating the costs of implementing policies to prevent and address the violence – or the cost of the solution.

Dr. Nata Duvvury, the Director for Global Women’s Studies at the National University of Ireland, has been working closely with ESCWA to develop the model and create this important “accountability tool.”

“Direct costs have been largely focused on the costs of service provision incurred by governments to provide police stations, health services, social services, and others,” she explained.

“But there is another aspect of direct costs that has not been captured very carefully across countries, which are the costs incurred by women to access services,” Dr. Duvvury stressed, noting that paying bribes is not uncommon for women in the Arab region, in addition to other fees to access physical and psychosocial support.

As the eighth session of the Committee on Women inched to its end on Thursday, small pins were distributed by Dr. Naglaa Al-Adly from Egypt’s National Council of Women, featuring an Arabic letter called the *Taa Marbouta*.



Dr. Naglaa Al-Adly, Representative of Egypt’s National Council of Women, speaks to the media wearing the Taa Marbouta campaign pin on her jacket. Photo: ESCWA/Daniela Abraham

“We use this letter as the secret of our power as women,” Dr. Al-Adly explained. “We’re stressing the idea to not be afraid, fight for your rights, be strong, we are behind you.”

‘Taa Marbouta’ is added to words that are feminine to denote grammatical gender; it is also associated with several powerful words in the Arabic language such as ‘dignity,’ ‘power’ and ‘willingness.’

Launched one year ago by Egypt’s National Council of Women and the UN, the ‘Taa Marbouta’ campaign promotes women’s social, political and economic empowerment in the North African country.

“Because it’s an Arabic letter it is also relevant to women in many other

countries,” she added, indicating that the “secret” of women’s power can only be stronger when they come together.

September ‘deadliest month’ of 2017 for Syrians, UN relief official reports

6 October 2017 – Hospitals, ambulances, schools and displaced people escaping violence are being routinely targeted by airstrikes in Syria, resulting in high numbers of deaths and injuries, and making September the deadliest month of the year, according to the United Nations regional relief coordinator for the crisis.

“I am appalled by reports of high numbers of civilian [casualties due to heavy air attacks](#) in Syria,” said Panos Moutzis, the Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis .

“September was the deadliest month of 2017 for civilians with daily reports of attacks on residential areas resulting in hundreds of conflict-related deaths and injuries,” he added in a news release issued by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs ([OCHA](#)).

This week, airstrikes on Raqqa City killed dozens of people and injured many others while some 8,000 others remain trapped there.

Between 19-30 September, airstrikes on residential areas in Idlib killed at least 149 people – the majority of whom were women and children.

“Attacks on medical facilities are depriving people in need of their right to life-saving medical care,” stressed Mr. Moutzis.

Schools and hospitals in Idlib have been forced to close for fear of being targeted. Three explosions in Damascus city caused the death of 20 people and injured 15 more. Civilian casualties were also reported in Rural Damascus, Hama, Aleppo and Deir-ez-Zor.

“I would like to praise the phenomenal work carried out by humanitarian workers and in particular national staff,” he continued, noting that rescue workers on a daily basis risk their lives to help others.

“The UN calls on all parties to the conflict to immediately take all measures to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure throughout Syria,” underscored the Mr. Moutzis. He asserted that targeting civilians and facilities, including hospitals and other medical facilities is “simply unacceptable and constitute a grave violation of human rights and

international humanitarian law and may amount to war crimes.”

“All parties to the conflict must respect their international obligations and act in a way that ensures the protection of civilians and humanitarian workers,” concluded Mr. Moutzis.