

Press release: British medical heroes deploying to combat deadly diphtheria outbreak in Bangladesh

NHS staff members of the UK Emergency Medical Team taking part in a training exercise, December 2016

More than 40 British doctors, nurses and firefighters from the UK's Emergency Medical Team (EMT) are making their way to Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh to save thousands of lives at risk from a rapid and deadly outbreak of diphtheria.

This is the first ever deployment of Britain's EMT since it was certified by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 2016 and will see more than a dozen medical heroes fly out shortly after Christmas on 28 December, followed by the rest in the days after.

The UK's latest response follows a formal request for assistance from the WHO and the Government of Bangladesh after more than 2000 suspected cases and 22 reported deaths from the airborne virus. This is expected to increase significantly over the Christmas period and there are currently not enough staff or beds to manage the outbreak.

Diphtheria is a fast spreading, extremely deadly infection, and there are a reported 160 new cases every day in Cox's Bazar which is home to more than 600,000 Rohingya people who have recently fled the violence and military persecution in Burma. It is especially dangerous for children who are particularly vulnerable. It causes extreme difficulty breathing, inflammation of the heart which can lead to heart failure, problems with the nervous system and fatal paralysis.

People in the UK are routinely vaccinated against diphtheria; however, the overcrowded camps are a breeding ground for this fatal disease. DFID is already providing vaccines in response to the crisis.

The EMT will be deployed to Cox's Bazar for six weeks, where clinicians will work using existing health facilities. This will include 36 NHS medics, such as doctors, nurses and epidemiologists who will provide immediate specialist life-saving care to tackle the diphtheria outbreak, as well as around five logistics staff from UK fire and rescue services who will provide expert advice to create the right infrastructure for the EMT to start their urgent work.

The UK's support will strengthen the capacity of the Government of Bangladesh and NGOs to manage future outbreaks.

An advance team will travel to Cox's Bazar on 27 December to make logistical preparations. Following pre-deployment training, all remaining staff will be deployed from the 28 December, with the first wave leaving from Manchester

Airport.

International Development Secretary Penny Mordaunt said:

This will be an absolutely critical deployment, in a race against time for men, women and children at risk of dying from one of the world's cruellest infections.

Our brave British medical heroes are the world leaders in saving lives, acting rapidly in crisis to avert a humanitarian catastrophe.

I have heard first-hand the harrowing stories of Rohingya families who have escaped persistent persecution, violence and tragedy. In the face of this new horror it is absolutely right that we step up to end their relentless suffering and stop them falling prey to a rampaging, preventable disease that could kill thousands.

Department of Health Minister Steve Brine said:

The UK has a proud tradition of supporting nations in need.

Today marks another proud moment in the history of the NHS as selfless clinical staff once again show their skill, commitment and passion for helping people around the world.

Notes for Editors:

1. The UK's Emergency Medical Team is a collaboration between DFID, the NHS, Public Health England, UK Med – a register of NHS volunteers ready to deploy to emergencies, Handicap International and the UK Fire and Rescue Service. This is the first deployment of the EMT since it was verified by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in December 2016. UK medical personnel have previously been deployed to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013 and the Nepal earthquake in 2015.
2. The deployment will be funded from DFID's Bangladesh humanitarian budget – up to £650,000 has been earmarked for the EMT.
3. Diphtheria is a bacterial infection. It most often causes infection of the upper respiratory tract. Diphtheria is most commonly spread from person to person through respiratory droplets (coughs and sneezes), or by direct contact with either respiratory secretions or infected skin lesions. Respiratory diphtheria usually occurs after an incubation period of 2-5 days. It causes life-threatening airway obstruction (suffocation) if untreated
4. The first suspected case of diphtheria was reported on 10 November at an MSF clinic in Cox's Bazar. The outbreak was confirmed through laboratory testing on 04 December 2017. As of 23/12, 2,248 suspected cases of

diphtheria and 22 deaths have been reported.

5. In response to the diphtheria outbreak in Cox's Bazaar, existing clinical facilities are being converted and scaled up. This is currently being led by Médecins Sans Frontières MSF and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). However IOM and other international NGOs are unable to manage the complex care needs of these patients, which is why they require the support of UK staff.
6. IOM will provide the medical facilities for the deployment. WHO will provide drugs. UK EMT will provide a specialised clinical team, clinical oversight, some key medical equipment not available in country, and accommodation and transport for staff.
7. Following the request for international assistance by the World Health Organisation on 15 December, a UK EMT team travelled to Bangladesh to conduct an emergency assessment, and recommended the deployment of the EMT.
8. Staff will be rotated out of Cox's Bazaar after three weeks, to ensure they remain fresh. Staff will have a diphtheria booster injection before deployment and will then be at minimal risk of contracting the disease.
9. The International Development Secretary visited Cox's Bazaar in November 2017, where she announced extra UK aid for the humanitarian crisis, providing urgently needed food now and ensuring more lives are not put at risk when international funding starts to run out in February 2018. This brings the UK's total humanitarian support to £59 million since 25 August 2017.
10. Free-to-use video content is available to download [here](#).