

# Global CORRESPONDENT

## World Update

Stephanie Rosborough, MD, MPH

### CHOLERA CRISIS IN ZIMBABWE

**M**ore than 565 people have died from a massive cholera outbreak in the southern African country of Zimbabwe since August 2008. The outbreak is fueled by a failed public water supply and sanitation system together with a crumbling national health infrastructure that lacks even basic equipment and supplies. As of early December 2008, the United Nations' official cholera case tally reached 12,545 nationwide, with no end in sight to the spread of the epidemic. The Zimbabwe Association of Doctors for Human Rights estimated that the actual numbers of cases and deaths could be several times higher than official counts because cholera victims who die at home are not part of the official numbers.

Cholera is endemic in Zimbabwe, which has seen annual outbreaks since 1998. The current epidemic, however, far outstrips the last large outbreak in 1992, when 3000 cases were recorded according to a World Health Organization report. In past years, cholera struck mainly rural areas, but now all 10 of Zimbabwe's provinces are reporting cases. Both Harare and Chitungwiza, Zimbabwe's second largest city, are at the center of the current crisis. The Zimbabwe National Water Authority shut off all water supply to Harare on November 30, 2008 after running out of water purification chemicals. Many densely populated areas of the capital already had been without water since April 2008. People were forced to drink from contaminated streams and shallow wells, many of which were dug in household yards near overflowing city sewer pipes. One resident told BBC News that in Harare "there is raw sewage running down streets."

The national health system is struggling to keep up with the demand for medical services amid longstanding financial and political upheaval. Many public hospitals, including Harare's 2 largest facilities, have closed in the face of severe supply shortages. Health workers strike regularly to demand better salaries and working conditions. Hospital staff, like all Zimbabwean workers, have been hit hard by the country's economic collapse. The official inflation rate of 231 million percent is the world's highest, only 1 in 10

adults has a regular job, and Reuters reports that prices double every 24 hours. On top of that, the government imposes a daily maximum bank withdrawal limit of Z\$500,000 (US\$0.25). IRIN News points out that the average one-way commuter fare in Harare is Z\$1 million (US\$0.50).

The Zimbabwean government has been slow to respond to the cholera outbreak, refusing to proclaim it a national emergency. IRIN News reported that Deputy Health Minister Edwin Muguti declared the situation was "under control" on November 27, although the government was reportedly petitioning neighboring countries for body bags. Health Minister David Parirenyatwa responded to the crisis by urging citizens to stop shaking hands so as to prevent spread of the disease, according to Sky News. At the same time, the government placed blame for the crisis on Western sanctions targeted at President Robert Mugabe. Those sanctions, enacted after international accusations of vote rigging and political violence, are focused on banning travel and freezing the assets of Mugabe and his close political allies, whose disastrous rule began after independence from Britain in 1980.

Despite the devastation it has caused in Zimbabwe, cholera is an easily treated disease. Severe dehydration resulting from the acute watery diarrhea of cholera is remedied by drinking oral rehydration salts in clean water. The Sphere Project's guideline for an acceptable case fatality rate during an outbreak of cholera is less than 1%. Current figures from Zimbabwe point to average fatality rates near 10%, even up to 50% in some areas. Aid agencies will need more than money and political support to fight the current epidemic. Wet weather tends to spread infected feces and further contaminate water supplies, and as of this writing, the rainy season in Zimbabwe had just begun.

### MUMBAI ATTACKS STRAIN RELATIONS

The November 26, 2008 terrorist attacks in India's financial capital Mumbai have strained relations between India and Pakistan, both nuclear powers. The attackers are thought to have been trained and based in Pakistan, and some Indians believe that Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence had a hand in the attacks, although US counterterrorism officials said there is

no clear evidence of such a link. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met separately with both Indian and Pakistani officials in 2008 to encourage the 2 countries to work together to find and prosecute the perpetrators of the attacks. According to the BBC, analysts say the United States is concerned that strained Indian–Pakistani relations will distract Pakistan from efforts to fight Islamic extremists along its Afghan border.

According to the lone surviving attacker, Muhammad Ajmal Kasab, 21, his group trained in Pakistan under the auspices of Lashkar-e-Taiba, a militant group formerly backed by Pakistani intelligence and most widely known for opposing Indian control in the disputed Kashmir region. Investigators found evidence that 2 senior members of Lashkar-e-Taiba, Yusuf Muzammil and Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi, masterminded and helped conduct the attacks by giving instructions to the terrorists by cell phone from Pakistan during the assaults. Lashkar-e-Taiba has denied any involvement.

The Mumbai terrorist attacks killed at least 188 people, including 22 foreigners, of whom 6 were US citizens. More than 200 others were injured. Investigators say that attackers sailed from Karachi, Pakistan, and appeared to have hijacked an Indian fishing trawler with 5 crew members on board. One crew member was found with his hands tied behind his back and his throat slit; the others may have been thrown overboard. The attackers apparently sailed close to shore and then boarded small rubber dinghies for their landing in Mumbai's fishing colony at Cuffe Parade at around 9 PM local time on November 26. Carrying assault rifles and wearing backpacks stuffed with ammunition and grenades, the men split into 3 groups and took taxis to their predetermined targets.

The first of 7 attack sites was Mumbai's main railway station, Chhatrapati Shivaji, formerly Victoria Terminus, through which hundreds of thousands of downtown commuters transit daily. Two attackers stormed the busy terminal with gunfire and grenades and shot 3 policemen. The attackers commandeered a vehicle and drove to nearby Cama and Albbless Hospital for women and children, in which they opened fire and were later killed by police. Gunshots also were reported at the historic Times of India building. Another group of gunmen attacked Nariman House, home to the Jewish Chabad Lubavitch outreach center, where 6 people were killed, including an Israeli rabbi and his wife. The International Herald Tribune reported that some of the Nariman House victims bore strangulation marks and other wounds that did not come from gunshots or grenades. The 2 Nariman House gunmen were later killed by police. A separate group of terrorists opened fire on diners at Cafe Leopold, a well-known restaurant and nightspot that opened in 1871 and is popular with Mumbai's tourists and artistic crowd. Across town, the Oberoi Trident Hotel was seized by attackers who threw grenades and fired on staff and guests. The Oberoi

Trident is located in the city's main business district near the Bombay Stock Exchange and is popular with business travelers. More than 24 people were killed there, including 2 militants. The longest siege took place at the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel, a 105-year-old landmark that is as much a symbol of Mumbai as the World Trade Center towers were of New York. The hotel is popular with foreigners and tourists, and Mumbai's elite often gather at this waterfront hotel overlooking the historic Gateway of India monument. It took a team of commandos to bring the assault on the Taj Mahal Hotel to an end nearly 60 hours after the attacks started. At least 30 people were killed in the Taj hotel, where attackers reportedly demanded guests' passports in a search for Americans. In all, 10 militants are known to have conducted the attacks, of whom 9 were killed by Indian security forces during the response operation.

Although India suffers regular bombings as a result primarily of violence between Hindus and Muslims, the Mumbai attacks were unprecedented in their specific targeting of Americans and Jews. According to BBC News, thousands of Indian protestors gathered in central Mumbai after the attacks shouting "down with Pakistan" and "shame on politicians." Some protestors called for a military response against Pakistan, and others focused their frustration on Indian officials, who have been criticized for failing to prevent the attacks despite reportedly receiving warnings of the threat up to 1 month in advance. Indian Home Minister Shivraj Patil resigned his position following the attacks, and national security advisor M.K. Narayanan and chief minister of the Indian state of Maharashtra Vilasrao Deshmukh both offered their resignations. According to the Associated Press, security consultants questioned the preparedness of Mumbai's police forces and the time it took for commando units to reach the city. Mumbai, a city of 18 million people, does not have its own police emergency response team, and had to wait nearly 10 hours for India's commando unit, the National Security Guards, to arrive from New Delhi, where it serves primarily to protect India's top government officials.

### About the Author

*Dr Rosborough is Director, International Emergency Medicine Fellowship, Department of Emergency Medicine, Brigham and Women's Hospital.*

*Address correspondence and reprint requests to Dr Stephanie Rosborough, Dept of Emergency Medicine, Brigham and Women's Hospital, 75 Francis St, Boston, MA 02115 (e-mail: srosborough@partners.org).*

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### Author's Disclosure

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