

## Rain leads to spike in cholera in Haiti

Dennis Sadowski | Catholic News Service | Jun. 9, 2011

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- Three weeks of intermittent heavy rain have led to a spike in the number of cholera cases in the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince and in several rural areas where health care workers are struggling to handle the surge.

The rain also caused flooding in low-lying areas and mudslides in the hills around the capital, causing more than two dozen deaths as of June 9, the Haitian government reported. Several people have been reported missing.

The floods displaced hundreds of people from hillside communities as well as from some of the hundreds of makeshift tent camps that sprouted after the country's devastating January 2010 earthquake.

One hard-hit area, the Delmas 33 neighborhood in Port-au-Prince, saw houses flooded and debris strewn along roadways, reported Sister Mary Finnick, a Grey Nun of the Sacred Heart who runs Matthew 25 House, which hosts short-term volunteers as part of the Nashville, Tenn.-based Parish Twinning Program of the Americas.

"In our neighborhood houses were inundated, and one can see household items, furniture, clothing caught in bushes along the road as roadways turned into swift rivers," Sister Mary wrote in an email. "So many ravines are depositories of garbage that when the rains come the ability of the water to flow is hampered, backs up and invades homes."

Aid agencies have boosted efforts to head off the water-borne disease through renewed emphasis on hygiene and prevention techniques, Carl C. Stecker, senior technical adviser for health and HIV/AIDS for Catholic Relief Services in Haiti, told Catholic News Service June 8.

"The flooding has been recent, in the past week, and mudslides," Stecker said. "Those are the things that are going to facilitate the spread of cholera."

The rural Southeast, Grand-Anse, South and West departments as well as Port-au-Prince reported significant increases in cholera cases after the rain began, according to a May 27 Health Cluster Bulletin from the international agencies coordinating health care response in the wake of the earthquake.

Through June 4, the Haitian Ministry of Health and Population reported 331,454 cholera cases with 5,386 deaths since the outbreak began in mid-October.

Stecker reported up to a fourfold increase of cholera cases in some rural communities where the diarrheal disease spread by contaminated food and water had been held in check for several months.

In the capital, the increase in cholera was reported primarily outside of the tent camps, he said.

"At the internally displaced persons camp they may have portable toilets or one toilet for X number of people, but they're getting cleaned out every day," Stecker explained.

The most serious flooding occurred June 7 after an overnight storm dumped nearly five inches of rain on parts of metropolitan Port-au-Prince. Flooding and mudslides were reported in the suburb of Petionville, neighboring Carrefour, Tabarre, Cite Soleil and in the Delmas 62 neighborhood of the capital.

The storm led CRS to send teams of workers into areas where the agency had built temporary shelters for earthquake victims.

Niek de Goeij, head of programming central for CRS in Port-au-Prince, told CNS June 9 that workers visited several locales both in the city and in outlying areas to assess how well the temporary shelters held up and if any were in danger of being overrun by mudslides.

"We're offering retraining this morning for people to exercise extreme caution so their shelters are not washing away off the hillsides," de Goeij said. "We're making sure people are building homes in safe areas."

Torrential rain also fell in the Dominican Republic and Jamaica, forcing emergency workers to evacuate thousands of people from flood-prone areas. No injuries or deaths were reported.

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