

# Haiti cholera deaths rise above 300

October 28 2010, by Clarens Renois

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Haiti's cholera toll rose Thursday above 300, as doctors sought desperately to contain the epidemic as victims overwhelmed the quake-hit nation's crumbling hospitals, spilling into its maternity wards.

One week after cholera was confirmed in Haiti for the first time in decades, the death rate is slowing but almost 5,000 people have now been infected and officials warn it could be years before it is eradicated.

Clinics were beyond capacity with cholera patients on the floor of one radiology department and another five-bed maternity center, not well equipped to treat the virulent [diarrheal disease](#), housing 300 patients.

The source of the outbreak is still unclear, although MINUSTAH, the UN peacekeeping force is probing claims its septic tanks leaked into the Artibonite river and contaminated it with [fecal bacteria](#).

The [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) warned the outbreak was far from over and Haiti should prepare for the disease to hit its capital Port-au-Prince, which is teeming with tent cities after January's catastrophic earthquake.

"We cannot say it is contained," WHO's cholera chief, Claire-Lise Chaignat, told journalists in Geneva.

"I think we haven't reached the peak," she said, recommending that Haitian authorities prepare for the "worst case scenario" -- cholera in the capital.

The acute intestinal infection is caused by ingesting food or water contaminated with the *Vibrio cholerae* bacteria.

The source of the infection is believed to have been the Artibonite river, a major artery that runs through Haiti to the coast near Saint Marc -- the outbreak's epicenter some 60 miles (100 kilometers) north of Port-au-Prince.

Although easily treated, cholera has a short [incubation period](#) -- sometimes just a few hours -- and causes acute watery diarrhea that can quickly lead to severe dehydration and death.

Some 1.3 million people displaced by the 7.0 earthquake on January 12 are still crammed into thousands of makeshift camps. Aid agencies fear cholera could spread like wildfire in such conditions.

Fear of the disease is turning to anger, as Haitians begin to blame foreign aid workers and peacekeepers for the Caribbean nation's first ever outbreak of cholera.

The installation of a vital treatment center in Saint-Marc had to be halted on Wednesday after some 300 residents confronted doctors and aid workers.

Fueled by fear the facility would spread cholera to two nearby schools, residents hurled stones at medical workers of the international medical agency Doctors Without Borders (MSF).

The specialized treatment center was being set up outside the overwhelmed Saint Nicolas hospital here, where some 800 patients are already being treated with hundreds of new cases arriving each day, officials said.

Argentine troops with MINUSTAH moved in, stopped the protest, and then oversaw the dismantling of the facility.

"It was a big misunderstanding," Haitian doctor Yfto Maquette told AFP in the hospital's chaotic courtyard overflowing with patients who were supposed to have been moved to the new facility.

"The fact that we don't have the center is stopping us from effectively treating people," said an MSF official who declined to be named.

"We need to get the message out that [cholera](#) is a disease that we are very experienced in treating," he said.

Maquette pointed out there was still need for basic response tools for the crisis, saying the medical team "only has one ambulance to bring people into the hospital."

Meanwhile, the group's field coordinator in Saint-Marc was optimistic the epidemic was being controlled.

"The fact that we are seeing fewer severe cases is positive," said Federica Nogarotto, the MSF field coordinator in Saint-Marc.

"It suggests that people are taking precautions and that there is a greater understanding in the community of the need to maintain strict hygiene and to seek medical assistance at the first sign of symptoms."

Among the young patients at Saint Nicholas was four-year-old Jules Djelickson, who lay motionless on a cot, staring vacantly into the distance, as his mother Pacius Celette waved a grubby rag to keep flies off his face.

Asked about the MSF site being shut down, she said: "The community is

scared, but they don't have a choice, we need it."

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