

Cholera emergency declared in Sierra Leone

August 20 2012, by CLARENCE ROY-MACAULAY

(AP) — An outbreak of cholera in West Africa has infected more than 13,000 people and killed at least 258 people in Sierra Leone and Guinea, authorities said as they appealed for international assistance.

Sierra Leone's President Ernest Bai Koroma has declared the outbreak there an "emergency issue," and has set up a task force to prepare the budget that will be needed to stem the outbreak.

"All of this is the aftermath of the 11 years rebel war when we had a huge rural-to-urban migration and a huge population clustered in the urban area where adequate provision has not been made for water and sanitation. This is what we have been witnessing today," Minister of Health and Sanitation Zainab Hawa Bangura told The Associated Press.

She said that in the capital, Freetown, there have been about 100 deaths during the past month, especially in congested areas. That brings the total to at least 176 dead in Sierra Leone, while 82 deaths have been reported in neighboring Guinea.

"It is important to request help from the international community in order to spread the mobilization of resources," she said.

Cholera is an infection of the small intestine, contracted by eating or drinking contaminated food or liquids. It can cause acute diarrhea and vomiting and can kill within hours.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

said there has been a spike in reported cholera cases since mid-July and the onset of the rainy season. Over the past five weeks, 6,000 cases alone have been confirmed in Sierra Leone and many other cases might not have been officially reported.

"This current outbreak of cholera has the potential to be devastating and is proving very difficult to control," said Amanda McClelland, IFRC emergency health coordinator. "We are particularly concerned by the rising numbers in Freetown, which suffers from overcrowding, poor sanitation and lack of safe water access — all factors which contribute to this deadly disease."

Parts of Mali and Niger have also been affected by the outbreak, the Red Cross said.

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