

# Cuba acknowledges 51 cholera cases (Update 3)

January 15 2013, by Anne-Marie Garcia

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Cuba's Public Health Ministry on Tuesday acknowledged 51 new cases of cholera in the capital amid growing concerns about the illness' spread and disappointment in the diplomatic community over the government's lack of transparency.

The ministry said nobody had died from the latest outbreak, which began Jan. 6, and stressed that preventive measures already taken had put the disease "on the way to extinction." It said cholera was first detected in the capital's Cerro neighborhood, and then spread elsewhere. No other areas of the capital were mentioned, but there have been reports of cases in the leafy Playa neighborhood that is home to many foreign embassies.

The government has not responded to repeated requests for comment in recent months, nor has it made any experts available to talk about the cholera situation. The family of one man, 46-year-old Ubaldo Pino Rodriguez, told The Associated Press last week that he died of cholera in Cerro on Jan. 2, about two weeks after going to the hospital with severe vomiting.

Rodriguez's sister, Yanise Pino, said her brother had a drinking problem and lived in squalid and unhygienic conditions in a tiny makeshift wooden dwelling.

"When he began to feel bad he thought it was from drinking and nothing else," she said, adding that he left the hospital of his own accord last month. She said that following his death authorities sealed off Ubaldo's

room and told her to burn all his belongings.

Juan Bautista Ferrera, a retiree in Havana's Miramar neighborhood, told AP that he was hospitalized with cholera for five days last week after suffering severe diarrhea.

"I was isolated in a room and nobody could come to see me. I communicated with my wife by phone," he said, adding he never worried about his life. "I'm 75 years old and I don't fear anything. The medical attention was very good so I never thought for a minute I could die of it."

Ferrera's wife, Caridad Neyes, said health workers gave them chlorine to clean their home and also handed out medicine. She said several restaurants in the neighborhood were closed but have since reopened.

Cholera is a waterborne disease caused by a bacteria found in tainted water or food. It can kill within hours through dehydration, but is treatable if caught in time. Cholera is unusual in Cuba. But recent outbreaks in nearby Haiti have killed more than 7,200 people.

It was unclear why a new outbreak was being seen in Havana. Rains, which can help spread the disease, are common in January, but the weather has been unusually dry this year.

In August, Cuba announced that a cholera outbreak had run its course after sickening 417 people and leaving three dead. That outbreak originated in the eastern city of Manzanillo, in Granma province. Some have speculated the epidemic gained new life following the widespread devastation caused in October by Hurricane Sandy, which damaged more than 200,000 homes in eastern Cuba.

On Tuesday, the British Embassy in Havana issued a travel advisory in

response to the cholera reports, urging its citizens to take "sensible precautions" and seek immediate medical attention for diarrhea. U.S. diplomats on the island issued a travel warning Monday urging American citizens to follow local health recommendations.

Several other European diplomats have told AP they are also considering issuing advisories, and have been concerned that the government is not sharing information with them in a timely manner. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly.

Tourism is the top sector in Cuba's flagging Communist economy, with 2.8 million visitors a year and about \$2.5 billion in annual revenue. A major cholera outbreak is sure to make some visitors think twice about a trip, despite Cuba's sterling reputation in responding to epidemics and natural disasters.

The island has a well-organized civil defense system capable of rapidly mobilizing government agencies and citizens groups. Brigades of workers go door to door, noisily fumigating homes and admonishing residents to eliminate standing water where mosquitos bearing another tropical disease, dengue, could breed.

American tourists are barred from visiting Cuba due to the half-century old economic embargo, but 400,000 Cuban-Americans come down each year for family visits, and about 100,000 others get licenses to come on cultural or other exchanges. There have been no reports so far of any tourists coming down with the illness.

Tuesday's Public Health Ministry statement—carried in the Communist Party newspaper Granma and elsewhere—made no mention of any cholera cases reported outside Havana.

While Cuba's state-run media had been largely silent about cholera before Tuesday, there has been an intensified campaign against water-borne diarrhetic illnesses, of which cholera is one. Several health centers in the capital require visitors to sanitize their shoes by stepping in chlorine when they enter, and state schools have been stressing hand-washing and other hygiene measures.

While some have voiced nervousness over the outbreak, many said they were confident the government had a strong handle on the outbreak.

Beatriz Guerra, a 26-year-old mother of two who lives in Miramar, said a state-run school attended by her eldest son was closed briefly last week to clean and disinfect the rooms and furniture. She said residents had been advised at neighborhood meetings to take precautions and be particularly vigilant of what their children were touching and putting in their mouth.

"I know that they are taking the necessary measures," she said. "One just needs to be very cautious."

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