

Cholera outbreak among Burundi refugees in Tanzania slowing: UN

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A cholera outbreak raging among Burundian refugees in Tanzania has slowed significantly with no new deaths reported in the past five days, the United Nations said Tuesday.

So far, around 30 people have died and more than 4,400 people have been infected with cholera in the western Tanzania's Lake Tanganyika area, which has been flooded with people fleeing political unrest in neighbouring Burundi, the UN refugee agency said.

But UNHCR spokesman Adrian Edwards told reporters in Geneva that the number of new daily cases had fallen to around 100 from a peak of 915 on May 18.

Last week, the agency reported an average of 300-400 cases daily.

"The reduction in cases is largely due to the concerted approach to contain the spread of the outbreak through intensified measures to promote hygiene," he said.

"For now the situation is improving, but clearly resolving it fully may take several weeks," he added.

The number of deaths had been revised down from 31 to 30 after one of the deaths reported last week was reclassified, Edwards said.

The World Health Organization, which is also working to contain the

outbreak, confirmed the drop in cases, but urged continued vigilance.

"Despite the downward trend we have seen in the last few days the situation is still dire," Rufaro Chatora, WHO representative in the region, told reporters in a conference call.

He pointed out that cholera was endemic to the region, and also existed on the Burundi side of the border.

"We have to be on the watch-out," he said.

The tiny and hard-to-access Tanzanian border town Kagunga had been struggling with tens of thousands of refugees living in dire conditions.

UNHCR and other organisations have been working to move them by ship to the western province of Kigoma and by bus or on foot to the Nyagurusu refugee camp, and Edwards said Tuesday that around 30,000 had so far been transferred to the camp.

"We hope to complete the movements of the remaining few thousand refugees either today or tomorrow," he said, adding that "arrangements have begun for massive decontamination."

At the Tanganyika stadium in Kigoma, where refugees had been living while waiting to move on to the camp, "the water and sanitation situations have also been showing positive results," Edwards said.

Cholera is transmitted through contaminated drinking water, and UNHCR said overcrowding and unsanitary conditions in Kagunga, as well as the consumption of water directly from the lake, were believed to have sparked the outbreak.

Burundi's crisis erupted late last month after the ruling CNDD-FDD

party nominated President Pierre Nkurunziza to stand for a third term in June presidential elections, prompting street protests that have so far left at least 30 people dead.

The crisis deepened earlier this month when a top general staged a failed coup attempt.

Since early April, some 90,500 Burundians have fled to neighbouring countries, with around half of them taking refuge in Tanzania, Edwards said.

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