

Hundreds of children sickened, dead in Papua health crisis

January 25 2018

Some 800 children have been sickened by a measles-and-malnutrition outbreak in Indonesia's remote Papua province, officials said Thursday, with as many as 100 other people, mostly toddlers, feared to have been killed.

The latest figures mark an escalation of a health crisis first made public in mid-January that underscores the severe lack of [medical care](#) and other basic services in a far-flung island region shared with Papua New Guinea.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo has ordered military and medical teams to bring supplies to remote villages, amid a low-level separatist insurgency largely driven by resentment over conditions in the impoverished region.

Doctors at an overloaded and under-equipped hospital in Agats were struggling to cope Thursday, as crying, rake-thin [children](#) wandered smelly hallways where some patients lay on rickety gurneys, an AFP reporter witnessed.

Local officials were shocked by the spike in measles cases, which is being blamed partly on weakened immune systems due to lack of food.

Many parents travelled for hours to seek care for their children in Agats, which has the only hospital in the outbreak-hit Asmat region, a swampy area criss-crossed by rivers.

"We received information (about the outbreak) too late so that has led to the high [death toll](#)," hospital director Richard Mirino told AFP.

Dozens of patients are being treated at a local church due to lack of space at the 80-patient hospital, which sits on stilts like most structures in the area.

Gabriel Dem and his malnourished son travelled two hours by boat from a tiny village to reach the [hospital](#), which has little modern equipment and no air conditioning.

"There isn't much food there so we're suffering," Dem said of his community, as he sat in the stifling heat.

"In order to eat we have to go out and fish or hunt. There are no shops."

The health ministry and military officials said nearly 800 children have been sickened with measles or malnutrition, while some 12,000 kids with no symptoms have been treated, including by vaccination, to prevent a spread of the outbreak.

Around 70 children have died around Asmat with more than two dozen others, including children and adults, believed to have perished from the outbreak in the remote and mountainous district of Oksibil.

Many Papuans live a semi-nomadic life in hard-to-reach areas that have almost no proper medical care.

"There are actually health problems in Papua every year or two... but this (time) it is extraordinary because the death toll is very high so the government thought urgent action needed to be taken," said Papua military spokesman Dax Sianturi.

"Our biggest obstacle is the difficult terrain because Asmat people are nomads. They move from one place to the other and live along the river or swamps."

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