

Malaria surging in Tigray, WHO warns

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The World Health Organization reported Friday a sharp increase in malaria cases in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region, where government and rebel forces have been fighting for nearly two years.

Cases have increased by 80 percent compared to one year ago, said Ilham Abdelhai Nour, the WHO's head of emergency operations for Ethiopia.

"We need to implement and undertake activities to prevent and treat malaria," she told a press briefing in Geneva, but the WHO has had no air or road access to Tigray for the last six weeks.

The WHO had been able to transport in some material from March to August during the humanitarian truce, but the lack of fuel has severely limited the resupply of health centres in the region.

For the first time since the 1960s, people in Tigray do not have access to [preventive interventions](#) against malaria, such as prophylactic drugs, according to the UN health agency.

The WHO does have access to the neighbouring regions of Afar and Amhara. In the latter region, malaria cases have increased by 40 percent in a year.

No cholera or [measles cases](#) have been observed so far in Tigray, said Abdelhai Nour, but the WHO remains concerned, especially since only nine percent of the health centres in the region are fully functional.

The conflict in the region began on November 4, 2020, when Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sent troops into Tigray after accusing the region's ruling Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) of attacking federal army camps.

A truce between pro-government forces and rebels this year lasted five months before it collapsed in August.

International concern is now growing for those caught in the crossfire.

WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who is himself from Tigray, said last week there was only a "very narrow window now to prevent genocide" in the region.

Tedros said the six million people of Tigray had been "kept under siege for almost two years".

Altaf Musani, the WHO's director of health emergencies interventions, called for sustained access to all parts of Ethiopia.

"When you look at the range of health risks, it's large, it's immediate, it's real," he said Friday.

He reported on an ongoing cholera outbreak in three sub-districts of Ethiopia's Oromia region and a neighbouring sub-district of Somali region.

A total of 273 confirmed cases have been declared.

"In addition to cholera, we're deeply concerned about the measles situation," he said, with more than 6,000 confirmed cases reported nationwide so far this year.

The WHO is also deeply concerned about malnutrition across Ethiopia.

According to the UN's World Food Programme, the rate of global acute malnutrition among children under five in Tigray is 29 percent.

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