

UN urges aid to avert cholera-induced famine in Yemen

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International donors must step up to prevent a cholera epidemic in war-torn Yemen from producing full-blown famine among hundreds of thousands of people, a UN official said Tuesday.

More than 313,000 suspected cases and 1,732 deaths are attributable to the outbreak since it erupted in April, said Jamie McGoldrick, the UN's humanitarian coordinator in Yemen.

Hard-pressed UN agencies are doing their best to stem the epidemic by diverting resources from [food](#) programmes, he told reporters in Geneva.

"We are very short of funding overall. We are robbing Peter to pay Paul," he said by telephone, warning of a vicious cycle as people weakened by a lack of food become easier prey to [cholera](#).

The collapse of Yemen's infrastructure after more than two years of war between the Saudi-backed government and Shiite rebels who control the capital Sanaa has made for a "perfect storm for cholera", according to the World Health Organization.

Cholera is a highly [contagious bacterial infection](#) spread through contaminated food or water.

Although the disease is easily treatable, doing so in Yemen has proved particularly difficult. The war has left less than half of the country's medical facilities in working order.

McGoldrick conceded that the UN had underestimated the virulence of cholera's spread in Yemen, and confirmed that a programme of vaccination was being discontinued as the disease had outpaced it already.

He noted that much of the \$1.1 billion (966,000 euros) in aid pledged by donor governments in April to deal with Yemen's overall humanitarian needs has yet to be disbursed.

Donors who have yet to translate pledges into action "should put cash on the table" now, McGoldrick said.

The UN itself has opened up funds from an emergency budget but there remains a shortfall of just over \$100 million to deal with immediate [health](#) needs, the official said.

He also appealed for greater flexibility in how aid is spent, for instance to allow the UN to foot the salaries of Yemeni health workers, many of whom have not been paid for months.

"We've been asked in some cases to replace the health system. We cannot. We do not have the resources or the mandate," the UN official said.

"And this epidemic is spreading further and faster than anything we've seen before.

"Cholera is today's crisis. Famine is tomorrow's crisis," he said, estimating that some 500,000 Yemenis could face famine in the near future unless help is forthcoming.

About 17 million people—two-thirds of Yemen's population—are uncertain of where their next meal will come from, according to the

World Food Programme.

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