

HAITI IN A TIME OF CHOLERA

Introduction

Focus

Less than a year after being rocked by an earthquake, Haiti found itself reeling from a cholera epidemic. This *News in Review* story examines the ongoing misery of the Haitian people and the slow pace of recovery for the impoverished nation.

Did you know . . .

Cholera kills over 100 000 people a year, mostly in nations without proper sanitation systems and access to clean water.

It is difficult to fathom how the nation of Haiti could survive any more devastating blows. The earthquake of January 2010 lasted just 35 seconds but left a macabre trail in its wake: 300 000 dead, hundreds of thousands wounded, and over a million left homeless. As if that wasn't enough, a cholera epidemic spread through the country in the fall of 2010, killing over 4 000.

Cholera is a devastating infection brought on by a bacterium that attacks a victim's small intestine. The bacterium enters a person through the consumption of contaminated water or food. While most people who come in contact with the bacterium are able to ward off the infection, others are subject to a quick and painful death. Symptoms include diarrhea, vomiting, and dehydration. Some victims die within hours.

Aid workers were concerned about a cholera outbreak following the earthquake. Since Haiti has no sewer system or waste treatment facilities it seemed reasonable to conclude that Haiti could be subject to this deadly ailment. However, much to the relief of Haitians, cholera did not present itself in the 10 months following the earthquake. Unfortunately, in the fall of 2010, cholera victims started to surface in the coastal town of Saint-Marc and, by the one-year anniversary of the earthquake, cholera had spread to different parts of the country.

Complicating matters, the Haitian government moved ahead with an election in November—right in the middle of the cholera crisis. Since the earthquake, President René Préval had done little to ease the fears of the people of Haiti. It was hoped that a new president would bring some calm to the nation, especially in the face of the cholera epidemic. Unfortunately, the election proved more chaotic than calming, with no clear leader emerging and an unscheduled run-off election left dangling in limbo. Then, to push Haiti's political situation to the brink of absolute chaos, former dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier decided to return to Haiti after years in exile.

The emergence of cholera and the corresponding political problems in Haiti served to draw attention to the continuing plight of the Haitian people. Hadn't the world donated billions of dollars to help Haiti get back on its feet? Should that money not have been used by authorities to ward off potential health threats like cholera? Why had so little progress been made in efforts to rebuild and modernize Haiti? Media reports seemed to suggest that Haiti was no further ahead than they were before the earthquake struck on that ominous January day. Where once there was hope, despair soon took its place as Haiti's climb out of destitution was stalled once again.

To Consider

1. How is it possible that after the world donated billions of dollars to Haiti the country is still in chaos?
2. How does the current crisis in Haiti affect outside observers? Do they want to help? Or do they feel the situation is hopeless?
3. What responsibility do wealthy nations have to poor nations?

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Video Review

Pre-viewing Questions

Discuss the following questions with a classmate and record your responses in the spaces that follow.

1. What do you know about Haiti? (Are you aware that Haiti is one of the poorest countries in the world? Did you know that 300 000 people were killed in an earthquake that struck Haiti in January 2010?)

2. Why is it particularly heart-wrenching when a poor nation is struck by tragedy?

3. How much do you know about cholera? (How do you catch it? How is it treated? How serious is it?)

Viewing Questions

Record your responses to the following questions while you view the video.

1. What evidence is there early in the video that the pace of reconstruction is very slow in post-earthquake Haiti?

2. How long had it been since Haiti had to contend with an outbreak of cholera?

3. What caused cholera to spread so quickly?

4. What are some of the symptoms of cholera?

5. Why did riots break out in Haiti as the cholera epidemic grew more severe?

6. Who did Haitians blame for bringing cholera to their country?

7. How many people died in the cholera clinic that Paul Hunter visited?

8. How long do experts think the cholera outbreak will last?

9. What happened to the water purifiers Canada sent to Haiti? Why weren't they put to work right away?

10. How much of the post-earthquake rubble had been removed by the one-year anniversary of the earthquake?

11. According to Oxfam's Robert Fox, who isn't providing the money they promised to Haiti?

12. a) What question did protestors chant at rallies marking the one-year anniversary of the earthquake?

b) Was the question a fair one to put to people in authority like Michaëlle Jean and Bill Clinton?

13. How many Haitians had died from cholera by the end of January 2011?

Post-viewing Discussion

In a small group, discuss and respond to the question below. Be prepared to share your response with the entire class.

The pace of reconstruction in Haiti has been painfully slow. What do you think could be done to accelerate the reconstruction process?

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Haiti's Cholera Outbreak

Further Research

The Canadian government issued a traveller's alert in December 2010 in response to the cholera outbreak in Haiti. Visit the Public Health Agency of Canada Web site for the latest information on the outbreak, at www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/tmp-pmv/thn-csv/quake-tremble-haiti-eng.php.

Focus for Reading

How much attention does Canadian society pay to cleanliness and hygiene? Consider this question from a personal perspective, a municipal perspective, and a national perspective. What would Canada be like if we didn't emphasize things like hand washing or sewage treatment? Would abandoning current cleanliness and hygiene practices endanger people's lives?

Crisis Averted?

Haitian authorities thought they had dodged a bullet by the summer of 2010. With 1.5 million left homeless after January's earthquake, people needed to find clean and stable places to live. Relief camps were set up through funding from allies like Canada and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like World Vision. The affected people were living in massive tent cities with relatively clean water and healthy food. The big scare—cholera—had failed to materialize despite the fact that Haiti lacked sewage treatment facilities (or sewers for that matter) as well as universal access to clean water. The last thing the paralyzed nation needed was an epidemic to set it back even further.

Cholera Arrives

Just when most experts were thinking the threat had passed, people started walking into the main hospital in Saint-Marc with some frightening symptoms: sunken eyes, persistent vomiting, uncontrollable diarrhea, and severe dehydration. Hospital officials wondered if cholera—an infection that Haiti hadn't seen in 100 years—had found its way to the outport of Saint-Marc. It didn't take long for doctors and nurses to answer this question—as patient after patient came through their doors, many of whom died within hours.

Where did it come from?

Within weeks the cholera outbreak

was confirmed. In early November, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) tested samples and determined that the cholera strain surfacing in Haiti closely resembled one originating in South Asia. This led to speculation that cholera had been unwittingly imported by UN peacekeeping troops from Nepal who had set up camp along a tributary of the Artibonite River. It was assumed that human waste from the toilets in the peacekeepers' camp had leached into the tributary and flowed into the river, thus exposing Haitians living downstream who rely on the river for drinking and bathing. Haitians began to protest the presence of the troops from Nepal, with one skirmish involving UN troops resulting in the deaths of two protestors.

Chaos

The fear and civil unrest brought on by the cholera outbreak inspired chaos across Haiti. The ensuing chaos caused delays in the delivery of health-care resources and water-purification systems to affected areas. Eventually cholera cases hit the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince. Sister Marcella Catozza, a nurse working in one of the city's worst slums, put the cholera crisis in perspective when she told reporters, "Cholera kills people here easily. They aren't strong. They have worms. They're malnourished. Three bouts of diarrhea and it's over" (*Toronto Star*, November 20, 2010).

Treatment

As the death toll mounted, people started to get the message: cholera could be avoided by bathing in clean water, drinking only bottled water, and making sure food did not originate from a contaminated source. If infected, victims could seek help from health-care providers at hospitals or aid organizations. The solution was relatively simple—administration of rehydration liquids and, in more extreme cases, intravenous fluids or antibiotics.

Unfortunately, simple solutions are more of a dream than a reality in Haiti. For example, people living in the community of Barbe who became ill with cholera were forced to descend a mountain in the Terre Nette mountain range on foot. Barbe is located in the heart of the Artibonite Valley and is considered one of the poorest areas in

Haiti. Once they reached the base of the mountain they received rehydration liquids orally or through an IV at a small clinic before continuing their walk to the Hospital Albert Schweitzer in Deschapelles. Those who couldn't walk were carried by family and friends—the journey taking between six and seven hours. Seeing that cholera at its deadliest can kill within hours, it is no wonder that many of the people of Barbe died from the infection.

With this in mind, aid agencies eventually got their cholera response programs in place, and the prevalence of the infection began to wane. Unfortunately, cholera had done a lot of damage in a ruinous autumn of 2010. By mid-January, Haiti reported over 185 000 cases of cholera and close to 4 000 deaths due to the infection.

To Consider

1. Why did Haiti think it had avoided a cholera epidemic?
2. Who did many Haitians blame for the emergence of cholera?
3. How is cholera treated?
4. Why was it so difficult for the people of Barbe to get access to health care?

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Fact Sheet: What is cholera?

Focus for Reading

What do you know about cholera? Make a point-form list of the things you know about the infection before you begin reviewing this fact sheet.

Cholera is an infection brought on by the consumption of food or water contaminated by the bacterium *Vibrio cholerae*. The infection has a two-hour to five-day incubation period. The majority of people who become infected show no symptoms, but in about 25 per cent of cases symptoms surface, and about five per cent of those infected becoming extremely ill.

Symptoms

Dehydration, watery diarrhea (often called “rice water” stool), vomiting

Treatment

Rehydration therapy, administered either orally or intravenously. In some cases antibiotics are administered.

Transmission

Primarily through fecally contaminated water and food. While 75 per cent of people are asymptomatic, their feces still contain the bacteria. If human waste is not treated or sanitized, the outbreak of cholera simply continues to expand through the water supply.

Activity

Convert the information found in this fact sheet into a web diagram. Put the word *cholera* in the centre of the diagram and branch out using each of the subheadings. Include as much information as you can in the diagram.

Risk Factors

Any community that lacks an effective sewage treatment system and water purification infrastructure is susceptible to a cholera outbreak.

Prevention

Proper hygiene—especially hand washing—and the consumption of clean water and food are the key preventative measures.

Prevalence

Three to five million cases of cholera are reported worldwide each year. Somewhere between 100 000 and 120 000 people die from cholera annually.

Source: World Health Organization, Cholera (June 2010; Fact sheet #107)

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One Year Later

Learn More

To mark the one-year anniversary of the Haitian earthquake, CBC reporter Paul Hunter returned to Haiti and filed the story "In Haiti today, the church bells are ringing." Read his story online at www.cbc.ca/world/story/2011/01/10/f-haiti-hunter-reporter-notebook.html.

Focus for Reading

Pretend that Prince Edward Island was rocked by an earthquake. The destruction was widespread, with close to 30 per cent of the island's homes, businesses, schools, and government building reduced to rubble. If the Canadian government responded by giving \$5-billion to authorities in PEI for reconstruction, what would you expect to see within a year of the earthquake?

The Reporters Return

Reporters returned to Haiti in January 2011 to mark the one-year anniversary of the earthquake that killed 300 000 people and left 1.5 million people homeless. It was hoped that the media would report on a Haiti that was like the mythical Phoenix rising from the ashes, emerging revitalized and reborn. Instead, what reporters found was a Haiti that continues to live in misery.

Loss of Hope

The reconstruction of Haiti will take at least 10 years to complete and cost in excess of \$14-billion. Perhaps it was naïve of the world to think that rapid reconstruction would have occurred just one year after the earthquake crippled the already destitute nation. However, with \$5.3-billion in short-term aid pledged to Haiti by the international community, it didn't seem unreasonable to expect a construction boom in cities like Port-au-Prince and Jacmel.

Instead, the same emergency relief camps that had been thrown up after the earthquake remained in place. There were still very few permanent shelters on the horizon for the over one million people living under tarps. In fact, of the 125 000 temporary shelters slated for construction, only 6 000 had been built. The slow pace of construction, combined with Haiti's 70 per cent unemployment rate, seemed to be keeping people tied to relief camps. In fairness, who would want

to leave a relief camp where food and clean water are provided every day for the unpredictability of life outside the camp?

Where is the money?

By the summer of 2010, the United Nations claimed that over 40 per cent of the aid money promised by the international community to Haiti had not arrived—including \$400-million from Canada and over \$1-billion from the United States. According to the Associated Press, however, the amount slated for Haiti that had been delivered was actually much less: only \$506-million, or 10 per cent. Various international government officials claimed that the money hadn't vanished, it was just stuck in a holding pattern and would be delivered once the Haitian government demonstrated precisely where the money would go. Canadian authorities worried that simply handing Haiti a blank cheque could result in corrupt government officials pocketing the money and leaving the poor to wallow in their poverty.

The NGOs

Meanwhile non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who received billions in donations after the earthquake continued to work with the money they acquired. By some estimates, close to 5 000 NGOs made their way to Haiti. Problems began surfacing when services were duplicated and money

was wasted. However, most NGOs provided exceptional humanitarian relief. The main problem with the presence of NGOs in Haiti was that they were providing services that the Haitian government should have been providing. They became the main delivery source for health care, food, and water. Some observers wondered if the NGOs might be becoming so powerful that they constituted a state within a state, leaving the Haitian government in a position where they did not have to make any significant public service decisions on their own.

Unnecessary Delays

While international aid money was being held back until the government

got its act together, President René Préval's government could not find a way to co-ordinate the relief effort. In terms of rebuilding, only five per cent of the rubble has been cleared a year after the earthquake and no serious dent has been made in reconstruction efforts. Meanwhile some complained that the government bureaucracy was causing unnecessary delays in the delivery of relief supplies (including water purification systems from Canada), with some reports indicating that construction materials in particular were being held in customs for weeks and sometimes months. Meanwhile, the homeless wait for reconstruction as the government continues to spin its wheels.

To Consider

Haiti achieved independence in 1804 after a prolonged slave revolt resulted in the eviction of France from the country and the establishment of the Haitian republic. Twenty years later, a revitalized France returned to Haiti and demanded 150 million gold francs in reparations for lost revenue resulting from the revolt; mainly in the area of farm revenue emerging from slave labour.

France threatened to invade Haiti if the money wasn't paid and so, from 1825 until 1947, Haiti scrambled to pay off 90 million gold francs of the reparation charge. Some historians feel that France should pay Haiti back, not only because they need the money, but also because of the immorality of demanding reparations tied to the slave trade. The reparations would amount to about 17 billion euros in today's money.

What do you think? Should the international community ask France to pay Haiti back? What kind of complications would arise if the international community pursued this course of action?

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Contested Election

To Consider

What motivates a person to run for public office? In your opinion, is it a commitment to public service or the power and prestige associated with being a public figure?

Ill-timed Election

The cholera epidemic that hit Haiti in the autumn of 2010 coincided with a tumultuous election campaign that many felt should have been postponed in light of the health crisis. Nonetheless, the election moved forward, with voting day occurring right in the middle of the epidemic. Many Haitians felt that the election was a referendum on the leadership of outgoing President René Prével's handling of the earthquake and cholera crisis.

The Candidates

In the lead-up to the late November vote as many as 34 candidates put their names forward for the office of president. The list was extensive and varied. There was Prével's hand-picked successor, Jude Célestin. There was former first lady Mirlande Manigat, whose husband was president for four months back in 1988. There was also revered performer Michel Martelly, a singer who goes by the nickname "Sweet Mickey." And there was also Haitian-born and U.S.-raised hip-hop star Wyclef Jean, who hoped to return to his native land and lead weary earthquake survivors out of the abyss.

Prével selected an electoral council to sort through the candidates. Many felt the council was designed to eliminate any direct threats to Prével's preferred candidate, Jude Célestin. Of the 34 candidates who entered the race, the field was narrowed down to 19, with Wyclef Jean being culled from the pack

because he hadn't lived in Haiti for five consecutive years. Jean countered that the fact that he voted in the election that brought Prével to power and that Prével himself had appointed him roving ambassador for Haiti in 2007 should have been enough to demonstrate that he was a worthy candidate. The hip-hop star's protest fell on deaf ears. He was out of the race.

Lack of Faith

Meanwhile, Manigat, Martelly, and Célestin survived the selection process, and it soon became clear that the election would be a three-horse race. Many worried that candidates were running for office to boost their own reputations and wealth or to lift those close to them out of poverty once they came to power and gained access to the government coffers. Skepticism and doubt ruled the race in the early days, with no clear front-runner emerging from the top three.

Once the cholera epidemic hit, many Haitians felt the election was a joke. Worse, they felt that their government had lost sight of its responsibilities in the face of a major health crisis. Adrien Pierre Louis, a volunteer at a Port-au-Prince health clinic, captured the sentiment best when he said, "Cholera is killing us because our government has abandoned us. Because they prefer elections to people. They let other nations give us help. Other nations, instead of our own people" (*The Globe and Mail*, November 20, 2010).

Quote

“The amount of votes not counted or counted wrong in this election is huge—much larger than has been reported by either the Organization of American States (OAS) or the Provisional Electoral Council (CEP).
— Mark Weisbrot, co-director, The Center for Economic and Policy Research (OpEdNews.Com, January 9, 2011)

Election Day

Election day arrived with experts predicting that the race was too close to call. Almost immediately candidates began observing voting irregularities, and some claimed electoral fraud. At one point, 12 of the candidates stood together and denounced René Préval and Jude Célestin for trying to steal the election and demanded that the vote be cancelled. Protests sprung up and chaos ensued—all on election day. It took days for the discrepancies to be put to rest. Préval’s electoral council said that there was no election fraud. International monitors concurred, saying the actions of the 12 candidates and their allegations of fraud were “hasty and irresponsible.”

No Decision

All that was left was for the election results to be announced. Haiti’s constitution mandates that a candidate must win over 50 per cent of the national vote to hold office. If there isn’t a clear winner on the first ballot, a subsequent ballot—called a run-off election—is held between the top two candidates. The results proved troubling: Manigat was the top candidate with 31 per cent of the vote, while Célestin and Martelly were virtually tied for second with 22 per cent each. According to the first official count, Célestin had earned 6 500 more votes than his opponent, but many felt, in light

of election irregularities, a recount would put Martelly on top.

More chaos and more protests swirled around Port-au-Prince. The original run-off election date of January 16 was postponed to February. With the support of the international community (who footed the bill for the election), the Organization of American States (OAS) reviewed voting irregularities and called for Martelly to be placed on the ballot instead of Célestin. Préval’s government responded by threatening to void the vote and have a new election in the spring.

The Dictator Returns

As the election results hung in limbo, it became clear that political infighting was further delaying the reconstruction of Haiti and creating a tumultuous political climate. Then, in a shocking development, former Haitian dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier returned to Port-au-Prince after decades in exile. The man whose armed militia, the Tonton Macoute, inspired fear in the hearts of Haitians had returned to his homeland. While authorities immediately sought to bring Duvalier to justice for crimes committed during his reign, many wondered if the former dictator had returned to capitalize on the political instability, thus adding one more complication to the chaos in post-earthquake Haiti.

Analysis

1. If the election was considered a referendum on the leadership of René Préval’s government, what did the election results reveal?
2. Should the election have been cancelled so that the government could have paid more attention to the cholera epidemic?
3. In light of the post-election confusion, should Haiti hold a new election or try to work their way through the current electoral crisis?

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Activity

Did you know . . .

Presentations that involve straight reading off a slide are often referred to as “death by PowerPoint” because the audience recognizes they are witnessing someone reading instead of someone presenting. It is boring for the audience.

While you may not wonder too much about what happens after you flush the toilet, you can rest assured that the sewage treatment infrastructure of your community is keeping you healthy. That’s right. You can take for granted that what you flushed away is not going to come back and give you a potentially deadly infection like cholera.

Many communities around the world do not have anywhere near this level of sanitation. Some nations are too poor to afford sanitation systems at all. Others have sewage treatment plants that fail to adequately clean refuse before cycling it back into the ecosystem. The result: outbreaks of potentially dangerous infections like cholera. For this activity you are going to learn about cholera and the daunting task some communities face when they are forced to fight this deadly infection.

Your Task

Step 1: Form a group of four. Go to the World Health Organization’s Web site (www.who.int/topics/cholera/en) and read the fact sheet about cholera.

Step 2: Click on the “Global Task Force on Cholera Control” tab on the WHO cholera main page and then click on “Country Profiles” on the left-hand side of the page. Pick a country and read about the current effects of cholera on that nation.

Step 3: Prepare a presentation on the effects of cholera on the nation you selected, including the following:

1. General information about the country
2. A history of cholera in the country
3. The risk factors that allow cholera to exist in the country
4. What is being done to manage the cholera crisis in the country

Note: No two groups can report on the same nation so make sure you clear your choice with your teacher before you begin your presentation.

Length of presentation: 10-15 minutes

Presentation Advice

You might want to use a program like PowerPoint to organize your presentation. If you choose this option make sure the points you are making are concise. Face your audience and refer to your own notes to expand on your points. Avoid reading off the slide. You also want to include visuals like pictures and graphs to highlight your points. Finally, use the many effects that the program has to offer.

Presenting is a skill that can be mastered with thoughtful preparation and attention paid to what you want the audience to experience. A good presentation will have your audience engaged—shifting their attention from the content of the slide back to you to see what you have to offer. In a sense, a well-prepared presentation takes the pressure off the presenter and puts the focus on the content being presented.