



War driving cholera in Syria

Conflict has damaged water treatment plants and caused hygiene and sanitation to deteriorate. Sharmila Devi reports.

For the **Sept 12 UN statement** see <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/united-nations-resident-and-humanitarian-coordinator-syria-imran-riza-statement-outbreak-cholera-syria-12-september-2022-enar>.

For the **water report by the International Committee of the Red Cross** see <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/syria-water-crisis-after-10-years-war>

The UN has warned that a cholera outbreak in Syria poses a “serious threat” to the region, with more than 1000 suspected cases and eight deaths reported as of mid-September, 2022, and the true numbers are likely to be under-reported, say aid agencies. The outbreak’s source was thought to be unsafe water from the Euphrates river used for drinking and to irrigate crops leading to food contamination, said the UN. “This outbreak is also an indicator of severe shortages of water throughout Syria. The United Nations have been sounding alarm bells on this issue for some time”, said a statement on Sept 12 from Imran Riza, UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Syria.

“With the Euphrates levels continuing to decrease, drought-like conditions and the extent of destruction of the national water infrastructure, much of the already vulnerable population of Syria is reliant on unsafe water sources, which may lead to the spread of dangerous water-borne diseases, particularly among children”, said Riza.

Neighbouring Iraq, which has seen drought as well as conflict, saw an outbreak of cholera earlier this year for the first time since 2015. Aid officials were concerned that if the Syria cholera outbreak worsened, countries might shut their borders used for aid deliveries, including the crossing from northern Iraq to the northeast of Syria and the crossing from Türkiye to the northwest of Syria.

Syria, which has not reported cholera since 2009, has suffered civil war since 2011, which has damaged two-thirds of the country’s water treatment plants, half of its pumping stations, and a third of its water towers, says UNICEF. Almost half of the population

relies on alternative sources of water, such as water trucks, which are often unsafe, while at least 70% of sewage is untreated. “Cholera is very much an indicator disease. It reflects the level of protection in society, access to safe water, access to sanitation, access to hygiene, overcrowding”, Michael Ryan, Executive Director of WHO’s health emergency programme, said in a Sept 14 news briefing.

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The UN estimates that 14.6 million people need humanitarian assistance, half a million children are chronically malnourished, and many health facilities remain damaged amid a severe shortage of health professionals, while rebuilding of infrastructure is stymied by international sanctions. The UN’s US\$4.44 billion 2022 humanitarian appeal for Syria had only received \$1.02 billion from donors as of June, 2022.

Before the war, more than 90% of Syrians had access to safe water, but only 50% of water and sanitation systems functioned properly, the International Committee of the Red Cross reported in late 2021. The wastewater treatment plants for Damascus and Aleppo suffered direct destruction in 2012, and rebuilding the Aleppo power plant would take at least 5 years, it said. “Armed groups have prevented the delivery of water as a weapon of war”, Wafaa Sadek, Syria Country Director for the International Medical Corps, told *The Lancet*. “People have resorted to recycling sewage water to drink and for their crops.”

To address the cholera outbreak, aid agencies had started the chlorination of water sources and distribution of response kits including oral rehydration salts and zinc. “There are no plans at present for vaccination, but this may be considered depending on how this outbreak evolves”, said Sadek. “Syria used to have a good health-care system and people hadn’t seen cholera before. That’s why they’re in shock.”

Many of the cholera cases so far have been reported in the northeast of Syria, which is under the control of US and Kurdish forces, while Türkiye and Syrian opposition groups each control areas in the north and the Syrian Government controls about 60% of the country. “Many people in Al Hasakah [in the northeast] rely on trucked water, which is unregulated and run by private companies that don’t test the water”, Tanya Evans, Syria Country Director for the International Rescue Committee, told *The Lancet*. “Now it’s cholera, but in a few weeks or months it could be something else because this is a complex crisis with multiple factors and a fragile health system.”

Aid coordination and an initial referral system had been formed quickly, but this would need to be ramped up, Lorenzo Ciancaglini, Health Programme Manager for Relief International, told *The Lancet*. “We only have about 10 days of data so far. Epidemiological investigation is an issue because cholera suspect cases often don’t want to give their name or phone number because there is a lack of trust”, he said. “Only today, a WASH [water, sanitation, and hygiene] team was kicked out of a rural area near the Euphrates. The war has undermined the trust within and between communities.”

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