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PAPUA NEW GUINEA: First cholera cases in 50 years



Photo: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

A Papua New Guinean from Bago-Bago wearing traditional dress. Many rural inhabitants have no idea what cholera is

BANGKOK, 7 September 2009 (IRIN) - Twelve people have died from the first outbreak of cholera in 50 years in Papua New Guinea (PNG), and the disease must be urgently contained before it spreads further, the World Health Organization (WHO) says.

Eigil Sorensen, WHO's representative in Papua New Guinea, said the cholera appeared in two coastal villages in northern Morobe Province at the end of July and gradually spread to four districts in the province, but was not identified until a month later.

“Cholera hasn't been reported in Papua New Guinea for the last 50 years,” Sorensen told IRIN, adding that the world health body was investigating the cause of the outbreaks.

“It's a major concern, mainly because the healthcare system in PNG remains weak ... Rural health services are quite weak and if cholera becomes endemic, it will become a major challenge,” he said.

Of the 130 reported cases so far, there had been 12 deaths, Sorensen said, and the disease appeared to be spreading through low level transmission.

“Since there is low level transmission and the number of cases remains relatively low, we think there is no contamination of any major water sources,” he said.

However, the disease has appeared in Lae, the provincial capital, which Sorensen attributed to people travelling from rural areas into the city.

“While it started in rural areas, it spread [in] about eight to 10 days back to urban areas and settlements of Lae,” said Sorensen.

Medical NGO Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) said on 7 September that Angau Hospital in Lae was on high alert over the cholera outbreak, and that it had helped the Ministry of Health establish a cholera treatment centre there.



Photo: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

A map of Papua New Guinea and surrounding countries

“MSF's emergency team has sent seven additional staff, including three nurses and a

water and sanitation specialist, to assist in the urgent response.”

WHO is helping the PNG government to coordinate the response to the outbreak, and is advocating outreach activities to educate communities about cholera and preventing its spread.

“Rural areas don’t even know about cholera, so we need to get the message out,” Sorenson said.

Morobe Province has also been hit by unrelated outbreaks of seasonal influenza and shigella, a bacteria that causes bloody diarrhoea.

Sorenson said about 40 people might have died from shigella in the last month in remote districts in Morobe.

“The diarrhoea seems to be more virulent; there are a few more deaths than usual from the shigella,” he said, adding that limited health facilities and poor access to assistance might have contributed to the deaths.

“The topography of the country is such that any part of the country may not have access to communications, and there is limited knowledge of people [about] these diseases.”

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Theme(s): **(IRIN) Early Warning, (IRIN) Health & Nutrition**

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