

# Combating Cholera

One day in October, twelve-year-old Saliu came home complaining of terrible stomach pains. Saliu's health quickly deteriorated, and his father rushed him to a hospital in Bissau, the capital of Guinea-Bissau, where he was diagnosed with cholera.

The boy was among thousands who fell ill after a cholera outbreak hit this tiny West African nation last May, claiming at least 218 lives.

An acute infection of the small intestine, cholera is a highly contagious, fast-acting disease that can induce extreme diarrhea and vomiting. It is preventable and treatable but, if not addressed, can lead to death from dehydration within hours. People get cholera when they ingest water or food that is contaminated with bacteria. The bacteria usually come from the human waste of those who have already been infected — which is why cholera flourishes in places without adequate sanitation facilities.

This fierce disease regularly stalks developing countries. Zimbabwe has been suffering from one of the largest cholera outbreaks ever recorded. More than 84,000 people have been infected, and more than 3,900 have died, as of this writing. Political turmoil, spiraling inflation, a crumbling infrastructure, and a collapsing health system have fueled the crisis and made it very difficult to contain. As of early February, the outbreak had spread to all of the country's ten provinces.

To help curb Zimbabwe's cholera epidemic, UNICEF has doubled its number of international staff in the country and developed a 180-day emergency plan. It has delivered a wide array of lifesaving interventions, including clean water, IV fluids, more than 25 million water purification tablets, more than 3,800 tons of water treatment chemicals, and over 200,000 bars of soap. In addition to installing water tanks in hard-hit areas, UNICEF trucked safe water to health facilities and cholera clinics. It has also provided 14 hospitals and more than 230 clinics with medical supplies, antibiotics, and one of the most effective weapons against the disease — oral rehydration salts. A packet of this simple solution of salts and sugars — which costs just six cents — can help prevent death from dehydration.

Cholera outbreaks in the developing world are especially common in the wake

of emergencies, when infrastructure breaks down and large numbers of people are displaced. Both Iraq and the Democratic Republic of the Congo recently experienced a surge in cholera cases. UNICEF, the World Health Organization, and other partners have also combated the disease in Angola, Malawi, and many other countries.

In Guinea-Bissau, meanwhile, UNICEF has helped provide affected communities with safe drinking water, oral rehydration salts, and other interventions. It has set up hospital tents to ease the pressure on facilities that quickly became overcrowded. Many people have received treatment and have recovered, including Saliu, who was able to go home with his father.



*A UNICEF worker helps a woman fill containers with safe drinking water in Zimbabwe's capital, Harare.*