

Case 8: Cholera in Haiti

After a magnitude 7.0 earthquake, Haiti was in dire need of international help. Already a poor country to begin with, Haiti needed much more than aid to rebuild its economy and infrastructure. It needed help on the ground to prevent a massive humanitarian crisis that would arise if its people couldn't get food, water, and shelter. In response to Haiti's need, peacekeepers from across the world poured into the country to help Haiti feed its people and rebuild. Unfortunately, that is also how many people in the country contracted cholera. More than 8000 people in Haiti died from cholera and 600,000 contracted the disease between 2010 and 2013.³⁶

The source of the outbreak—a strain of cholera common in South Asia—is believed to be a camp of Nepalese peacekeepers who had come to the country to help Haiti rebuild and had been doing good work to get people food and shelter. Conditions at the camp were less sanitary than initially reported and it's likely that human waste from the camp flowed into a nearby river. Cholera spread to nearby towns when people down river used the water for drinking and washing.³⁷ The outbreak has now spread to the local region, including Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and possibly Venezuela.

When knowledge of the Nepalese camp emerged rioters at a UN base in Haiti demanded the Nepalese troops leave. These riots ended up killing four Haitians and one UN worker. Recently, a group of 5000 Haitian cholera victims petitioned the UN, calling for large sums in reparations. But the UN, citing doubts about the cause of the outbreak and the inadvisability of suing people who had come to help, invoked its privileged immunity from lawsuits in 2013. Meanwhile a law firm representing the Haitians filed suit in a New York district court.

Haitians suffering or dying from cholera need some kind of recourse, but it also seems ungrateful to some people to ask for damages from people who had come to help. If the Nepalese peacekeepers were at fault for the origin of the epidemic, they most likely did not intend to transmit the disease. The mission to Haiti was to help alleviate suffering and rebuild the nation. If there is a more noble goal, it would be hard to find one. While duties of care and caution cannot be ignored, if individuals and countries must worry about unintended side effects of peacekeeping missions, then deployments will become much more complicated and contingent. Some countries may choose not to deploy peacekeepers at all rather than risk being sued for hundreds of millions of dollars for an unforeseen consequence like the transmission of a disease. Many more may look for immunity from litigation or propose increasingly difficult contractual arrangements.

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³⁶ "Epidemiological Update: Cholera," Pan American Health Organization, October 19, 2013, http://www.paho.org/hq/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_view&gid=23406&Itemid=

³⁷ UN Panel Report, "Final Report of the Independent Panel of Experts on the Cholera Outbreak in Haiti," <http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/haiti/UN-cholera-report-final.pdf>