

## Emergencies preparedness, response

### Epidemic focus

This is a rapid 'need to know' spotlight on current infectious disease threats. It is not intended to be an exhaustive list of cases and outbreaks but a focus on reasons for concern about specific infectious diseases currently posing threats to global public health.

#### Cholera: the genie that escaped

Hover over the image to explore its interactive elements on cholera. To enlarge the image, click [here](#).



#### Signals

**Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC):** Since late 2015, the DRC has been reporting a cholera outbreak (9361 cases, 159 deaths) that has been spreading in provinces along the Congo River -Maniema, Tshopo, Tshopo, Mongala (where cases doubled in the past week), Equateur, Mai-Ndombe - and has now reached the capital Kinshasa. Seven provinces in the east of the country are also reporting an ongoing outbreak.

**Tanzania** has been dealing with a large cholera outbreak since August 2015. The ongoing outbreak has claimed 338 lives, among 21,590 cases countrywide to date.

**Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia,** Tanzania's near neighbours are all reporting cholera outbreaks.

## Concerns

*Cholera is a 'genie that got out of the bottle' and is proving very difficult to put back in. During the 19th century, cholera spread across the world from its original reservoir in the Ganges delta in India. Six subsequent pandemics killed millions of people across all continents, and a seventh pandemic, which is still ongoing, began in Asia in 1961, reaching Africa in 1971 and the Americas in 1991.*

*During 2014, a total of 190,549 cases including 2231 deaths were reported worldwide but modelling studies suggest annual numbers may be much higher- between one and four million each year. This year, large outbreaks are ongoing in eastern and central Africa. With the continuing El Nino effect favouring the spread of cholera, more are expected.*

*The outbreak in DRC is particularly concerning as it is tracking along the Congo river, with high death rates reported, and has reached the capital Kinshasa. Health authorities in the DRC are also working hard to control a yellow fever outbreak with a mass vaccination campaign due to begin in Kinshasa this week. With two large outbreaks of serious epidemic diseases, the DRC health system is under intense pressure, facing conditions for a perfect infectious hazard storm.*

*Despite its tenacity, it is possible to contain the cholera 'genie'. There are new tools and strategies available to tackle this old disease. An international stockpile of cholera vaccines has been set up and is managed by WHO and partners (MSF, IFRC and UNICEF). In 2015, this stockpile was used to provide vaccines for more than one million people in seven high-risk countries (Bangladesh, Cameroon, Iraq, Malawi, Nepal, South Sudan and Tanzania) with cholera outbreaks.*

*The most effective strategy, protecting water sources from being contaminated with human waste, is an old one, which ended the great cholera outbreaks that terrorized 19th century Europe. The reduction in death from waterborne illness was so marked that engineers are often credited with having most impact on reduction in premature mortality during that century.*

## Tips

People can protect themselves from cholera by:

- Ensuring that drinking water is safe.
- Thorough hand washing with soap and safe water after defaecating, after handling human waste and always before eating and handling food.

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