

PORT-AU-PRINCE 12 November 2010 — With more than 700 people dead and 11,000 now sick from cholera across Haiti, additional sites in Port-au-Prince are reporting their first cases of the fatal yet preventable and treatable disease. In Gaston Margron, a camp where Save the Children provides health care to inhabitants and surrounding community, the first suspected case of cholera has been identified.

More than a million people have been living in crowded temporary camps since the earthquake in January and millions more live in the city's squalid slums with next to no access to clean water or proper sanitation facilities. In these areas, where people have very limited access to health care and live in unsanitary conditions, the waterborne disease could spread with terrifying speed.

Save the Children warns that educating people about the way the disease is contracted and spread is vital. Urging communities to seek immediate medical care and providing them with practical information and supplies to improve hygienic practices are the additional necessary steps to stemming a nationwide epidemic that could threaten the lives of thousands.

With a large number of deaths happening in the community, Save the Children fears that people may not be able to access health facilities when illness strikes. Also of concern is that people may not recognize the importance of seeking health care immediately when they have any signs of symptoms – namely, acute watery diarrhea.

Nick Ireland, who is leading Save the Children's cholera response in Haiti says, "A huge number of people are already affected by this outbreak. At this point, our best hope is to reduce the rate at which cholera spreads and the best way to do this is to arm people with information and supplies to improve hygienic practices.

"Health workers are going into the Haiti's slums and camps and blocking the charge of cholera through the most vulnerable communities by giving families information that can save them and their children from the disease: use clean water and soap to wash your hands, safely dispose of excreta, treat water at point of use, spread these prevention messages and seek treatment at the very first signs of the disease.

"People are not just victims of this cholera outbreak; they are the key to quashing it:"

Despite the best efforts of the Haitian authorities and aid workers, the number of deaths from the disease has doubled in the past week. There has not been cholera in Haiti since the 1960s. People need to know what the disease is, where it comes from, the huge risk it poses and, crucially, how they can protect themselves and their families from it.

Save the Children's immediate concern is to reach the poorest neighbourhoods that currently have limited access to health services, clean water and sanitation in densely populated areas

like Port-au-Prince, as well as Jacmel (SE department), Dessalines, Maissade and Léogâne.

The organization has been working with the Haitian authorities and other humanitarian organisations since the beginning of the outbreak to prepare for the worst-case scenario of a nationwide epidemic. It has focused on reaching into communities with information on how to prevent the spread of the disease, the importance of hand washing, treating water and seeking medical support at first signs of the disease. It has also been distributing clean water and building sanitation facilities such as latrines in camps and communities.

Nick Ireland says: “Epidemics are like organisms, they have lives of their own. It is unclear how this outbreak will play itself out, but we are all planning for the worst. The humanitarian community has ramped up its efforts to get lifesaving messages to vulnerable children and adults. It is crucial that we help communities to stamp out this killer disease.”

Since the earthquake, Save the Children has reached over 280,000 people with clean water, sanitation and hygiene promotion programs. When cholera was confirmed last month, Save the Children mobilized its medical teams to educate children and families on prevention, provide case management and identify, treat and work with partners on serious cases needing referral. The agency has readied health clinics and pre-positioned stocks of lifesaving medicines and supplies like oral rehydration salts. In addition, Save the Children is working with the United Nations, the government of Haiti and other nongovernmental organizations to address the situation.

Source: Save the Children