

Flooding complicates Haitian health provision

Violence and unrest have increased the impact of flooding, which might exacerbate an ongoing cholera outbreak. Joe Parkin Daniels reports.



When the rainy season began in early June, Haiti was unprepared. In one weekend, 42 people were killed by flooding caused by torrential downpours, while over 13 600 homes were listed as flooded, displacing thousands more. The country's western, southeastern, and central regions were most affected, officials said, while Prime Minister Ariel Henry called for international assistance. "A significant weather-induced event of this level so early in the hurricane season...raises concerns about the ability to provide a sustained response should extreme weather incidents continue to occur", the World Food Programme (WFP) warned in a statement.

The floods are the latest in a procession of calamities to befall the Caribbean country, which has been mired in turmoil that escalated with the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in July, 2021. Since then, the security situation has deteriorated as violent gangs contest territory amid a wider vacuum in governability. The country currently has no elected officials in Government—their terms expired and the conditions for safe and legitimate elections faraway. Henry, who assumed power following Moïse's death with the crucial backing of the USA, has called for foreign troops to intervene. Such a complex crisis continues to complicate public health, with Jean William Pape—one of the country's leading epidemiologists and the head of Gheskio, a health-care centre in Port-au-Prince—writing in *The New York Times* that "Haitians cannot overcome this crisis—the worst I have seen in my life — without foreign intervention."

Warring gangs, and the fuel shortages they cause, often interrupt the operations of health workers and humanitarian organisations. Gang

activity is focused in poor, heavily overcrowded slums, where disease control is a priority, although doctors often cannot enter. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) had temporarily closed its hospital in the vast Port-au-Prince slum of Cité Soleil in March because of nearby gun battles.

"Access to health care has been largely affected by insecurity", Edwige Bagula, MSF's Deputy Medical Coordinator in Haiti, told *The Lancet*. The doctor added that the wider economic crisis affecting the country due to ongoing instability was hampering health care in the country, with shortages in fuel rendering equipment inoperable, while medical staff cannot be paid. "On the other hand, [there has been] the gradual departure of qualified nursing staff abroad for security reasons, with an impact on the quality of care provided in local health structures."

Fiammetta Cappellini, country director for AVSI, an Italian charity with decades of experience in Haiti, said that the gang violence had contributed to the severity of the flooding in Cité Soleil. "There was no maintenance of drains and canals over the last three years due to the gang war", Cappellini said. "Every impact we are observing is due to instability that is preventing urgent interventions in these communities."

Meanwhile, food security remains a concern, particularly with rains affecting crops. According to the WFP, almost half of the population—approximately 4.9 million people—are acutely food insecure and in need of assistance. But the organisation reports that its activities are only 19% funded for the next 6 months, and "requires additional funding to be able to implement its lifesaving activities". "Haiti will never be at peace when almost half the

population is hungry", said World Food Programme head Cindy McCain on a recent visit to Haiti with UNICEF chief Catherine Russell that saw them both meet with Prime Minister Ariel Henry. In Jérémie, a city in the southwestern and agricultural Grand'Anse province that has been struck by earthquakes—most recently in June, 2023—humanitarian organisations are training local farmers in farming techniques that can help crops withstand natural disasters and combat food insecurity. "We're training them on land management, soil conservation, and best management for crops", said Alan Joseph, the programme manager in Grand'Anse for Mercy Corps, an American charity that provides seeds and tools for rural farmers.

A cholera outbreak continues to roil the country, with a resurgence beginning in October last year after 3 years without a reported case in Haiti. Since then, at least 726 people have died, according to health officials. "Cholera-like admissions have slightly increased lately—an average of 30 cases per day—in certain areas of Port-au-Prince", said Karine Sévère, a doctor working on the cholera response at Gheskio. "For the moment, the situation seems to be more or less stationary because of aggressive sensitisation actions undertaken by the Ministry of Health teams and its partners including Gheskio."

The floods have increased the risk that cholera will continue to spread, with Samson Marseille, an epidemiologist at the Ministry of Health, telling local media that "we've seen an increase in the number of cholera cases since the recent torrential rains that caused devastating flooding in the country".

Joe Parkin Daniels

For Pape's statement see <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/01/opinion/international-world/haiti-crisis-foreign-intervention.html>

For the WFP's statement see <https://reliefweb.int/report/haiti/wfp-haiti-information-booklet-overview-wfp-haitis-activities-achievements-and-targets-june-2023>

For Marseille's statement see <https://www.stvincenttimes.com/in-haiti-cholera-kills-over-700-people-since-october-2022/>