

UN official says armed gangs terrorizing Haiti as cholera spreads

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Patients receive treatment for cholera at the Gheskio Center Hospital supported by the United Nations Children's Fund in Port-au-Prince [Ricardo Arduengo/Reuters]

United Nations, November 17 (RHC)-- Armed gangs are “terrorising” residents in the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince, a United Nations official has warned, as deadly violence and instability continue to

complicate the country's response to a worsening outbreak of cholera.

Ulrika Richardson, the UN's resident and humanitarian coordinator in Haiti, told reporters on Wednesday that 195 murders were recorded in October – about three per day – along with 102 kidnappings. Armed gangs that control approximately 60 percent of the territory in Port-au-Prince are using “sexual violence, including rape ... to instill fear and to punish and to terrorise the local populations”, Richardson said during a news conference broadcast at UN headquarters. “They do this in order to expand their influence throughout the capital,” she added.

In addition to violence and political instability, Haiti is also grappling with rising numbers of cholera cases. Richardson said on Wednesday that cholera has now been recorded in eight of the country's 10 provinces.

As of last weekend, more than 7,200 people have been hospitalised with cholera across Haiti and at least 155 have died since the outbreak began in early October, according to the latest figures (PDF) from Haiti's public health ministry.

But UN and Haitian officials have said they fear cases will rise, especially after the end of a weeks-long, gang-led blockade on a key petrol terminal that paralysed the capital. The blockade was lifted this month and petrol stations are reopening. “The cholera situation in Haiti continues to worsen,” Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) Director Dr Carissa Etienne said during a separate briefing on Wednesday.

“This is a dangerous situation, and PAHO urges all countries to increase vigilance, while we support Haiti in providing life-saving care to patients, deploying health workers and facilitating access to fuel for health facilities,” Etienne said.

Haitian hospitals said in late September that they were being forced to cut back on services due to the blockade on the Varreux fuel terminal, which spurred water and electricity shortages and complicated the local response to the cholera outbreak.

Powerful Haitian gangs have been battling for control in the aftermath of President Jovenel Moise's assassination in July 2021, which worsened political instability in the country.

Cholera is caused by drinking water or eating food contaminated with cholera bacteria, and it can trigger severe diarrhoea as well as vomiting, thirst and other symptoms. It also spreads rapidly in areas without adequate sewage treatment or clean drinking water.

Haiti had last reported a cholera case more than three years ago, after a 2010 outbreak linked to United Nations peacekeepers caused approximately 10,000 deaths and more than 820,000 infections. PAHO has warned that as many as 500,000 Haitians are at risk of contracting cholera in the current outbreak.

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