

Malawi cholera death toll passes 1,000 as outbreak spreads

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The country's worst cholera outbreak in 20 years has killed more than 1,000 people so far
[Thoko Chikondi/AP Photo]

Lilongwe, January 26 (RHC)-- Malawi's worst cholera outbreak on record has left more than 1,000 people dead even as cases have reached 30,621, health minister Khumbize Chiponda has said. The death toll announced on Tuesday breached a grim milestone and surpassed the largest recorded outbreak, which killed 968 people between 2001 and 2002, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

Chiponda has called on people to take extra care handling the bodies of cholera victims before funerals. “People who are dying from cholera may be washed by family members who then prepare funeral feasts... outbreaks of cholera commonly follow these feasts,” she said. Chiponda also urged people to use proper decontamination procedures with chlorine and plastic body bags.

Most of the deaths occurred in the two main cities of Lilongwe and Blantyre where children have recently gone back to class after schools delayed opening to try and contain the spread.

Cholera regularly hits the southern African country during the rains from November to March, with deaths usually hovering around 100. But there was an unusually high surge in contaminations during and after the festive season in 2022.

In November 2022, Malawi received nearly three million doses of oral cholera vaccine from the United Nations to step up its immunisation campaign but case numbers continue to rise. Health ministry spokesman Adrian Chikumbe told AFP that all doses had been used. He added that “the fact that there is only one cholera vaccine manufacturer worldwide makes it difficult to acquire the life-saving drug”, creating competition between countries in need.

Cholera, which causes diarrhoea and vomiting, is contracted from a bacterium that is generally transmitted through contaminated food or water.

George Jobe, director of the nonprofit Malawi Health Equity Network, told AFP news agency that myths and misinformation spreading online were worsening the already dire situation. “Most people don’t believe we have cholera,” he said. Additionally, “some religions do not permit their [sick] members to go to the hospital.”

In September, the WHO warned that after years of decline, there was a “worrying upsurge” in cholera outbreaks globally, with climate change adding to traditional triggers such as poverty and conflict. The disease affects between 1.3 million and four million people worldwide each year, causing up to 143,000 deaths.

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