

Zimbabwe faces water and cholera crisis

Written by SAPA ANGUS SHAW

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As children play near cesspools, their parents shake their heads at a public service announcement that drifts over the radio urging people to boil water before drinking it.

It sounds like a taunt in a country where water and electricity supplies are off more than on.

This week, authorities turned off the taps in Zimbabwe's capital after the National Water Authority said it ran out of purifying chemicals and feared contaminated water would spread a cholera epidemic that has claimed hundreds of lives since August.

The crisis is the latest chapter in the collapse of this once-vibrant nation under President Robert Mugabe, who has ruled for 28 years and refuses to leave office even though he and his party lost elections in March.

An agreement to form a unity government with the opposition has been deadlocked for weeks over how to share Cabinet posts.

In Mabvuku, a suburb where residents have dug shallow wells in open ground, people say they know unboiled water can make them ill, but that they have no choice.

"We are afraid but there is no solution, most of the time the electricity is not available so we just use the water," resident Naison Chakwicha told AP Television News.

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In another suburb, Mbare, Anna Marimbe traced the deaths of two children last week to stinking open drains where she said the kids played.

Residents of the densely populated bedtown of Chitungwiza on Friday sued the National Water Authority in the High Court, saying they had been without running water for 13 months, causing cholera to surface and leading to deaths.

The application describes "large pools of raw sewerage" in the streets of the suburb, where the first cholera cases were reported.

Controlling the epidemic depends on providing clean water, which means also repairing burst water and sewage pipes as well as dilapidated pumping and purification equipment.

Harare is the epicenter of the cholera epidemic, which has spread across the country and spilled over its borders.

The government has reported 473 deaths since August and a total of 11,700 people infected by Monday, according to Paul Garwood, spokesman for Health Action and Crises, the humanitarian arm of the U.N. World Health Organization.

Garwood said that according to the official toll, 4 percent of people are dying of a disease that usually claims fewer than 1 percent of those infected and is easily treated with rehydration salts or an intravenous drip.

Doctors say the toll is nearer 1,000 dead, or 10 percent of victims, but nobody can count those dying at home and in the countryside without medical care. All the country's main hospitals have closed.

Those continuing to operate can offer little care with no medicines and a shortage of staff whose monthly salary does not cover one day's bus fare to get to work.

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The opposition-controlled Harare City Council is burying cholera victims for free because people cannot afford to buy graves.

Zimbabwe's government, normally hostile to international aid agencies, is welcoming an initiative by several - including the U.N.

Children's Fund, WHO and Doctors Without Borders - to provide emergency care as well as try to ensure safe water supplies.

Health officials, following the line of a government that is refusing to declare a national emergency, insisted the cholera outbreak was under control until five days ago.

Then, the best advice Health Minister David Parirenyatwa could offer was to urge people to stop shaking hands.

"I want to stress the issue of shaking hands. Although it's part of our tradition to shake hands, it's high time people stopped shaking hands," he told The Herald, a state newspaper.

The collapse of all services, including refuse collection, has turned the city into a playground for rats that threaten to spread other, more deadly, diseases.

Amid the disaster, Zimbabweans continue to find ways to deal with the crisis.

Those who can afford it are sinking wells and boreholes. Others are buying water tanks and pumps, then paying \$50 in foreign currency for a delivery of 2,000 liters (500 gallons) of water.

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Most vendors in Zimbabwe today only accept U.S. dollars or South African rand since the Zimbabwe dollar, once on a par with the greenback, seems to devalue with each hour that passes.

On Tuesday, it was trading for 1.8 million to the U.S. dollar: that is after the central bank dropped 10 zeros from the local currency this year in an attempt to keep up with inflation last set officially at 231 million percent by July.

Even money sometimes can't buy water.

One supplier told an AP reporter on Tuesday that he has a waiting list more than two weeks long.

Those without foreign currency must turn to "water Samaritans" - suburban residents who have wells or boreholes and are allowing people to fill buckets and jerry cans for free. Some residents are charging for the privilege.

Lines of mainly women and children gather daily outside the homes of people with wells. But even that supply is not assured.

Parirenyatwa, the health minister, voiced the fears of many when he said the cholera epidemic likely will get worse with the onset of the rainy season, which lasts two or three months.

"What I am afraid of is that now that the rainy season has come, all the feces lying in the bushes will be washed into shallow wells and contaminate the water," he said.

Associated Press writer Michelle Faul contributed from Johannesburg