

Trump didn't want to give Haiti \$11 million for cholera. So Congress found another way

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Included in the \$1.3 trillion spending package that was passed by Congress and signed by President Donald Trump on Friday is \$10 million to help Haiti fight cholera.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, who unsuccessfully tried to get the Trump administration last year to turn over \$11 million in unspent Haiti peacekeeping money to the United Nations' cholera plan, led the charge on getting the appropriation for small, locally based projects in communities severely impacted by the deadly waterborne epidemic.

The disease has killed more than 9,000 people and sickened more than 1 million since 2010.

"What happened in Haiti was a humanitarian disaster and not something we should walk away from," said Leahy, a Vermont Democrat and vice chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee. "The amount we are contributing is small, but it shows that we want to help the families that were the worst affected by the cholera epidemic. It's not enough to work only on improving access to clean water and sanitation, which we will continue to do."

Leahy pushed for support among Senate Republicans for the contribution while joining Senate and House leaders in intense negotiations to avert a third shutdown and fund the government until Sept. 30 with the new spending package. Advocates for cholera victims and supporters such as Reps. Frederica Wilson, D-Miami, and Carlos Curbelo, R-Miami, also urged colleagues in the House to back the appropriation.

Leahy, who has visited Haiti several times with his wife, a retired nurse, said the focus of the aid is "to help these particular communities that bore the brunt of what happened. What happened in Haiti 10 months after the earthquake was a colossal tragedy for thousands of desperate families."

Cholera was introduced to the country by United Nations peacekeepers from Nepal.

"We've never thought it was in any way intentional, but it was reckless and the consequences were immeasurable," he said.

The U.S. joins 40 nations — including South Korea, Canada and the Netherlands — that have contributed about \$8.7 million to a multi-partner cholera trust fund. Last week, Japan gave more than \$1 million that

will go to help UNICEF reduce transmission of the disease in metropolitan Port-au-Prince and surrounding communities.

Josette Sheeran, the U.N.'s special envoy for Haiti in charge of the cholera plan, wants to spend most of the money raised for the trust fund on helping affected communities, and find ways to raise funds for rapid response teams such as UNICEF's that are tasked with helping during outbreaks.

"We commend the U.S. Congress for the critically important designation of \$10 million included in the appropriations bill passed this morning, to alleviate the suffering caused by cholera in Haiti," Sheeran said. "Consultations have already begun with affected communities to support community projects for the benefit of those who have suffered."

For years, the United Nations would not acknowledge responsibility for the deadly disease, which had never before been seen in Haiti despite the country's lack of access to clean water and sanitation.

In 2016, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, in a carefully worded apology, finally acknowledged peacekeepers' role in the outbreak, telling the Haitian people: "We are profoundly sorry for our role." The multi-partner trust fund was then launched to raise \$400 million to eradicate the disease and compensate victims and their families.

But the U.N. and new Secretary-General António Guterres have struggled to get countries like the United States to contribute. Last year, Leahy proposed that the U.S. join those who had answered Guterres' call to voluntarily turn over \$40.5 million in unspent peacekeeping dollars to the cholera plan following the withdrawal of the blue-helmet forces from Haiti after nearly 14 years. The White House nixed the idea, even though Leahy had sponsored language in an appropriations bill allowing the U.S. to make the donation.

Fund-raising efforts again took a hit last month when the Haitian government refused to attend a high-level cholera retreat set up by Guterres and Sheeran to try to galvanize the international community.

Haitian President Jovenel Moïse made the decision after objecting to a communique issued by Guterres' Haiti special representative, Susan D. Page, welcoming a judicial corruption inquiry into how \$2 billion in oil loans from Venezuela were spent, and calling for a similar inquiry into alleged human rights violation by the Haitian police in a capital slum. Accusing the U.N. of overstepping its bounds, Moïse recalled his U.N. ambassador back to Port-au-Prince for consultations.

According to statistics from Haiti's Ministry of Health, there have been only eight cholera-related deaths so far this year and 773 suspected cases. The U.N. said cholera transmission has been reduced by 99 percent since 2010.

"Bringing this scourge to a clear and dignified end is finally within reach," Sheeran said. "Achieving success requires a true partnership with Haiti at all levels and working to support Haiti in building strong institutions and the capacity to deliver true and lasting benefits to the people of Haiti."

Brian Concannon, executive director of the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti, said while \$10 million will not stop cholera in Haiti or fulfill the U.N.'s \$400 million promise, "the appropriation will have a concrete, life-saving impact."

Concannon noted that his Boston-based advocacy organization, which unsuccessfully tried to sue the U.N. in federal court on behalf of thousands of cholera victims, mobilized volunteers and supporters in favor of the appropriation. In two days, he said, his organization helped secure bipartisan endorsements from 36 members of Congress for cholera funding. The effort was led by Wilson and Curbelo, as well as Democratic Reps. Maxine Waters of California and Yvette Clarke of New York.

Tim Rieser, Leahy's foreign policy aide, said the funds are being drawn from the balance of unused emergency funds for the Ebola crisis, which has several hundred million dollars left over.