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U.S. Congress to U.N.: What are you doing to compensate Haiti's cholera victims?

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More than 100 members of Congress are sounding the alarm over Haiti's deadly cholera epidemic and the victims of the waterborne disease who are still awaiting compensation from the United Nations.

Cholera, which was non-existent in Haiti for at least a century until it was introduced to the country eight years ago by U.N. peacekeepers, has killed 10,000 Haitians and sickened about 800,000 since the initial outbreak after Haiti's 2010 earthquake.

And while the number of cholera deaths and illnesses have continued to decline, according to the latest statistics from Haiti's Ministry of Health, victims are still dealing with the ripple effects, members of Congress said in a bipartisan June 14 letter to U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres.

"We are concerned that the UN's 2016 plan ...to eliminate cholera and provide redress for victims is not meeting victims' rights and needs," the letter stated.

In 2016, after finally accepting responsibility for its role in bringing the epidemic to Haiti, the U.N. announced a new approach to ease the plight of Haitians. It pledged to raise \$400 million to treat cholera victims and improve sanitation and water infrastructure in Haiti, while also providing "material assistance and support" to those most severely affected. Victims, the global body promised, would be consulted on any compensation decisions.

In the letter, congressional lawmakers say they want to know what steps the U.N. has taken to make direct compensation payments to victims because it appears that it is "unwilling to provide compensatory payments to cholera victims or engage directly with those affected about their needs."

But Josette Sheeran, Guterres' U.N. envoy for Haiti who oversees the cholera plan, said the U.N. has already launched a process "to provide meaningful consultations with those most affected by cholera."

The current budget, she said, allows for \$150,000 to be spent per community, and "the communities are empowered to democratically choose how they want funds invested, either through community or individual investment."

So far, three sections of Mirebalais, where the first outbreak occurred after cholera-contaminated sewage entered the nearby Artibonite River from a U.N. camp, have decided to use their share of the money to

bring clean water to their area, the U.N. said. A fourth community has decided to construct a new marketplace.

"The biggest obstacle to expanding remains the lack of funds," Sheeran said. "As funding becomes available, we will continue to expand these consultations and the projects that affected community platforms prioritize."

Her office noted that communities can still choose individual compensation for specific victims — but only after more discussions with the U.N.

Brian Concannon Jr., executive director of the Boston-based Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti (IJDH), said if discussions with the communities about how to spend their compensation have started, he welcomes them. But he said the victim organizations his group has contacted in Haiti have not heard from the U.N. He also questioned whether \$150,000 was sufficient given the seriousness of the disease.

The 101 members of Congress who signed the cholera letter said they have concerns about the community projects.

"We question whether community projects alone will redress the harms to affected families and allow them to recover," the letter stated.

The letter is the latest effort by Haiti's cholera victims and the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti to urge the U.N. to keep its promise to include victims in the decision-making as well as compensate them for losses as a result of the disease.

The letter, circulated by Rep. Maxine Waters, D-Calif., was signed by Miami-Dade and Broward County members of Congress, including Democratic Reps. Frederica Wilson, Debbie Wasserman-Schultz, Alcee Hastings and Ted Deutch, and Republican Reps. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Carlos Curbelo and Mario Diaz-Balart.

The U.N. had for years refused to acknowledge its involvement in Haiti's initial cholera outbreak, even after scientists matched the strain in Haiti to the one in Nepal. Nepal had an outbreak on Oct. 8, 2010, days before Nepalese soldiers arrived in Haiti and before a young Haitian lab technician confirmed cholera's existence in the quake-ravaged country.

In December 2016, former U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon finally offered a long-sought-after apology for the U.N.'s role while announcing a new approach after a previous \$2.2 billion, 10-year cholera elimination plan failed to gain traction.

During a visit by the U.N. Security Council to Port-au-Prince last year, victims vented their frustrations by hanging banners in the streets and staging protests near the council meetings. Haitian lawmakers also requested compensation in a private meeting with security council members.

At the time, the U.N. said no decision had been made about individual compensation versus community projects. But now that the U.N. is moving forward on community projects such as one in the town of Mirebalais, concerns are rising over whether victims will ever be adequately compensated.

The United Nations, U.S. lawmakers said, "seems determined to assist victims through charity-based community development projects only, despite pledging in the New Approach to consult victims about their needs and consider the possibility of providing direct payments to the most affected households."

And that, members of Congress say, is "particularly concerning given the economic devastation that cholera has wrought on Haitian households."

Last year, during a meeting of cholera victims in the Cité Soleil slum in Port-au-Prince on the heels of the U.N. Security Council visit, victims spoke of their ongoing struggle years after contracting cholera.

Some had to use their meager finances to pay for funerals after losing family members, while others said they were still paying for medical care for the disease's debilitating effects. All were frustrated by what they described as the U.N.'s unwillingness to directly compensate them.

"We want individual compensation," Berthony Clermont, the head of a cholera victims' association, said on Friday when informed about the letter and the U.N.'s efforts.

Clermont said he has registered 2,400 cholera victims across Haiti, and he hasn't been contacted by U.N. officials. "What is \$150,000 going to do? That is too little."

Lawmakers in the letter commend Guterres for his dedication to the cholera plan. But while he has made eradicating cholera from Haiti a priority, the U.N. chief has struggled to attract funds from foreign donors including the Trump administration. Last year the White House nixed turning over \$11 million in unspent peacekeeping dollars to help Haiti fight cholera.

In response, Congress stuck \$10 million in the \$1.3 trillion spending package that was approved and signed by the president earlier this year. The appropriation, which will go to the U.N., is for small, locally based projects in communities severely impacted by cholera.

Another attempt by Guterres and Sheeran to raise funds also hit a snag in late February when the Haitian government canceled its participation in a high-level cholera retreat in New York because Haitian President Jovenel Moïse was offended by a comment from one of Guterres' representatives about corruption and allegations of human rights abuses by a unit of the Haitian National Police.