
The United Nations and the Cholera Pandemic in Haiti

Heidi Kasper

Yonsei University Graduate School of International Studies (GSIS)

The United Nations (UN) established the Department of Peace Operations in 1992 to observe and monitor areas in conflict. Since the first peacekeeping missions in 1948, they have assisted in establishing peace agreements and strengthening the law. In 2010, however, infected UN peacekeepers from Nepal were sent to Haiti to give relief after a cataclysmic earthquake. The cholera outbreak occurred shortly after the peacekeepers' arrival and was traced back to the UN. Criticism grew over the legitimacy and abilities of the UN, and distrust also emerged when UN peacekeepers were connected to sexual misconduct during the cholera outbreak. As the UN did not want to lose more control, they originally denied responsibility for the breakout, but later acknowledged that they did contribute to it. In the future, what could the United Nations do to prevent their organization from being contaminated with a disease such as Cholera? This research analyzes which measures can be taken to prevent such occurrences in the future, and how this outbreak affected UN influence in the international community. A descriptive section will also examine the sexual misconduct allegations. This research was mainly conducted through secondary analysis and analysis based on government databases. This analysis presents possible preventive measures to limit infectious diseases and further contamination by UN staff, as well as also to increase accountability within the international organization, to prevent similar or worse outcomes in the future.

Introduction

The United Nations (UN) is an international organization founded shortly after

World War II, in 1945, by 51 countries, and is active across the globe.¹ Its main missions focus on preventing conflict, aid in humanitarian efforts, and peacebuilding. The first UN peacekeeping mission was established in 1948, to observe and monitor conflict areas, assist in setting peace agreements, and strengthening the law. However, in 2010, the legitimacy of the UN was brought into question, when infected UN Peacekeepers from Nepal were sent to Haiti for relief aid after an earthquake, and a cholera outbreak occurred. The cholera outbreak was traced back to the UN, as the bacterial disease swept across Haiti soon after the arrival of the Nepali Peacekeepers. Trust in the UN also declined as allegations of sexual misconduct and exploitation by UN staff arose. This critical multi-layered situation raises the following question: which measures could the UN implement to prevent staff contamination by a disease as well as misconduct? The following analysis suggests possible solutions to prevent the spread of infectious diseases by UN staff, manage potentially disastrous situations, as well as limit sexual exploitation by peacekeepers, to improve accountability within the organization and prevent worse outcomes in the future.

Since its creation in 1945, the UN's main goals have focused primarily on fostering durable partnerships and friendships between countries, maintaining security and peace, and establishing cooperation in the international sector. In February 2013, former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon stated the UN's main purpose during a speech at a book launch: "The United Nations is counting on each and every one of you to be a global citizen, to do your part to build a better world, and to take up the mantle of global leadership."²

Methodology and Limitations

This research analyzes the cholera outbreak in Haiti and suggests preventive measures for future UN Peacekeeper missions. The section covering the cholera outbreak in Haiti, sexual abuse allegations, and UN accountability, is based on qualitative research. This descriptive breakdown establishes a better understanding of the UN's failure in preventing the cholera outbreak and sexual

1 "History of the UN," *United Nations*, 2015, <https://www.un.org/un70/en/content/history/index.html#:~:text=The%20United%20Nations%20is%20an,living%20standards%20and%20human%20rights>

2 Ki-moon Ban, "Remarks at Launch of 'Building a Better Future for All: Selected Speeches of United Nations Secretary-General,'" *United Nations Secretary-General*, accessed December 19, 2020, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2013-02-20/remarks-launch-building-better-future-all-selected-speeches-united>

misconduct, mainly due to lack of control. Then, an analysis of preventative measures will be conducted, based on secondary analysis. The main goal of the analysis section is to find helpful preventive measures to keep such issues from occurring in the future and propose measures to prevent a similar outbreak.

The main research method is secondary analysis. Through secondary analysis, this paper gathered information on the cholera outbreak, collected from published primary data resources, government databases, research articles, and medical reports in journal articles. Governmental databases and the United Nations' website were used for focused information on the disaster in Haiti. The United States' national public health agency, the Center for Disease Control and Protection (CDC) is also useful for detailed information on diseases and preventive measures. Additionally, it allowed for the location of medical reports, as well as medical journals, such as *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, giving a more detailed scope of cholera, and accurate information on where the disease originated from in Haiti.

Relying on secondary data allowed for the use of previous research that analyzed the UN's failure to control and prevent the cholera outbreak, as well as the sexual abuse that followed. The graph from Figure 1, in the appendix, is a visual tool to better understand the spread of cholera in Haiti, and how it is connected to the UN peacekeepers. The graph analyzes the time-period during which the first cases were reported to pinpoint the location where the outbreak originally emerged. The map shows the first reported cases near Meille and Mirebalais, and then along the Artibonite river in October 2010. Considering that peacekeepers arrived in the area on October 9, 12 and 16, correlation in time and space can be concluded. However, this research has limitations, due to some audit reports on the epidemic not being released, and conflicting numbers on the infected and death toll victims.

The United Nations and the Peacekeepers

The UN Peacekeepers have operated for over 70 years and performed more than 55 operations that have been considered successful. UN peacekeeping operations were launched to aid the most vulnerable people. According to the UN, the peacekeepers' ultimate purpose is to "protect civilians, actively prevent conflict, reduce violence, strengthen security, and empower national authorities to assume these responsibilities."³ Peacekeeping is considered

3 United Nations Peacekeeping, "What We Do Peacekeeping," *United Nations*, accessed December 19, 2020, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/what-we-do>

political, and any success is reliant on sustainable political processes. The Security Council is essential in upholding Peacekeeper's values and objectives, as well as providing mission mandates that are clear and rational.⁴ Despite their ambitions and goals, peacekeeping operations are not without controversy, and the peacekeeping mission that left Haiti in disaster in 2010 contributed to the doubts of their success and abilities.

Cholera Outbreak in Haiti

In October 2010, it was reported by the Haitian Ministry of Public Health and Population (MSPP) that an epidemic of cholera was caused by a particular strain of bacteria known as *Vibrio Cholerae*.⁵ This strain of bacteria derives from a gram-negative strain that spreads through water and is found in saltwater or brackish environments. This strain of bacteria was considered rare, especially in the United States, and an outbreak in Haiti had not been reported in over a century. The outbreak can be linked to Nepali UN Peacekeepers, who arrived around the same time in Haiti for aid relief after an earthquake. During that time, Nepal had a Cholera outbreak from a similar strain of bacteria found in Haiti. The Nepali Peacekeepers were camped along the Meille River, which connects downstream to the Lantern River, and then the Artibonite River, a major water source for the people in Haiti. The Nepali Peacekeepers were illegally dumping waste in the river without treatment, which resulted in the spread of a cholera epidemic. According to the CDC, this cholera outbreak is considered one of the most catastrophic in recent history, with more than 820,000 cases and approximately 10,000 deaths since the initial outbreak occurred in Haiti.⁶ The disease has taken over ten years to eradicate.

Analysis on the cholera outbreak and UN responsibility

The onslaught of cholera in the Haiti outbreak brings into question the UN's ability to control their own personnel. What could the UN do to prevent its staff from being contaminated and spreading diseases such as cholera in the future? Before crafting and implementing measures that can prevent such a disaster from occurring, it is important to first track exactly how the

4 Ibid.

5 Renaud Piarroux et al., "Understanding the Cholera Epidemic, Haiti," *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 17, no. 7 (2011): 1161-1168.

6 "Cholera in Haiti," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/cholera/haiti/index.html>

Nepali Peacekeepers contaminated the water system. As mentioned earlier, it was found that the root cause of cholera in Haiti was unsuitable waste management and water contamination by the UN peacekeepers' camp. The peacekeepers were dumping inadequately treated sewage into public canals, ignoring laboratory cautions on fecal waste causing water contamination, leaving their camps with trash and toilets overflowing, and lacked inspection of their septic tanks or water treatment plants.⁷ As they did not inspect their septic tanks and lines, pipes leaked sewage and caused more contamination.

One study correlates the arrival of the peacekeepers to the first reported cholera cases at health centers in the area (Figure 1). The peacekeepers arrived on October 9, 12, and 16, and cases were reported by October 20, 2010. Epidemiologists in Haiti reported a pipe discharging sewage directly into the river from the camp as well as other deficiencies in sanitary measures.⁸ The UN's abilities and responsibilities were further questioned when auditors found inadequate measures for sewage disposal three years after the initial outbreak. There are other reports that Haiti is not the only case of waste mismanagement and inadequate treatment by UN staff. There are audits from other missions that reported inadequate waste management in the Ivory Coast, South Sudan, the Darfur region of Sudan, Lebanon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Liberia.⁹ This inadequate waste management is a significant issue within the UN framework and shows a lack of accountability within the international organization. Experts and professionals, including Beatrice Lindstrom, a lawyer from the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti, have been pushing for UN accountability for the cholera crisis. Lindstrom states that regarding waste management, "the results are egregious and show that this is a massive problem across the UN missions around the world."¹⁰

Solutions and Preventive Measures for the Future

Some waste management progress was achieved within the UN framework since the initial cholera outbreak. In 2015, the Department of Field Support (DFS) started implementing a stricter Environment Strategy to achieve

7 Rick Gladstone, "Poor Sanitation Persisted at U.N. Missions Long after Haiti Cholera Crisis," *The New York Times*, August 19, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/20/world/americas/haiti-cholera-sanitation-un-peacekeepers.html>

8 Renaud Piarroux et al., "Understanding the Cholera Epidemic, Haiti."

9 Rick Gladstone, "Poor Sanitation Persisted at U.N. Missions Long after Haiti Cholera Crisis."

10 Ibid.

set goals by 2020. Implemented measures include the development of a strategic coordination role for the office of the Under-Secretary-General, the creation of a three-year partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), closer environmental risk monitoring, and a more secure governing framework for managing waste.¹¹ There was additional progress in July 2016 when the UN purchased over 400 wastewater treatment plants for missions supported within the DFS.¹² Progress has been made and progressive measures have been put in place since the cholera disaster occurred, however, there is still a need for tighter accountability within the missions carried out by peacekeepers.

Even though some success towards managing waste have been implemented, there are still issues that remain within the Peacekeepers' UN framework. Although waste management is being monitored, more regular inspections are necessary. One solution is that inspections (both scheduled and unannounced) could be conducted more than once a month at all facilities or camps used by UN Peacekeepers. This would pressure individuals in charge of waste management to be compliant and up to date on all protocols or procedures for maintaining proper facilities. An internal unit within the UN is responsible for inspecting how waste is managed, but the use of local contractors would help boost community employment and provide more accountability. If waste management violations are found, penalties should be enforced for all those responsible. The case of Haiti shows a lack of accountability and enforcement, as the camps used by peacekeepers were neither closely monitored nor adequately enforced waste management rules.

The DFS could conduct risk assessments and data analysis throughout missionstopreventcontaminationandensureenvironmentallyfriendlymeasures in the disposal of wastewater. To ensure these new protocols are adhered to, another solution is to provide extensive training to peacekeepers regarding sanitation protocols in all countries. Personnel should be trained properly in protocols for disposal of wastewater and garbage. In the case of Haiti, garbage was found littered around the camp. Additionally, local communities can benefit from learning preventive measures to help eliminate the spread of disease.

11 Office of the Under-Secretary-General, *DFS Environment Strategy. Executive Summary*, report for the United Nations, April 2017, https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/peacekeeping/en/UNDFS_Environment_Strategy_ExecSum_vF.pdf

12 Ibid.

Another preventive measure that can help limit the spread of cholera and other infectious diseases is daily sanitary practices. The UN could administer education programs to help communities understand daily sanitary measures for proper hygiene, such as regular handwashing before food preparation and eating, as well as the use of sanitation facilities. Appropriate water drinking methods can be implemented into the program. If there is access to bottled water, programs should also teach the importance of unbroken seals and recommend that all water should be boiled for over one minute before drinking. Programs should also teach food health as some bacteria, such as the *Vibrio Cholerae* strain, can attach to shrimp and other species of shellfish. This means seafood should be handled with care and properly cooked to ensure that no bacteria linger.¹³ Proper disposal of fecal matter is also important in a teaching program, by including information on how to build simple sanitation systems, such as latrines. Protocols on proper distances for waste disposal should also be implemented, to ensure facilities are far enough from residential homes and located over 30 meters away from any body of water.¹⁴ For example, the Ethiopia Public Health Training Initiative (EPHTI) conducts missions that include the prevention of any possible contamination that could leak into a water source. Programs like this could not only help the peacekeepers, but also the local community in the area.

One factor behind the cholera epidemic in Haiti is the absence of proper screening of peacekeepers assigned to the area. There should be proper physical and health reviews before peacekeepers (or other personnel) travel to a mission area. Health checks should follow a strict protocol that is strongly adhered to as a preventive measure to halt the possibility of spreading a disease to another country. All personnel in the monitored area should undergo monthly health and physical medical checks to ensure that there are reduced possibilities of contamination.

The UN received criticism for the cholera outbreak and for not taking responsibility. Additionally, the UN also faced criticism over reconstruction efforts being slow and even sidestepping business and governments. While the UN has made progress toward more accountability, the organization has not accepted legal responsibility for the cholera epidemic in Haiti. However, steps

13 Aaron Sidder, "How Cholera Spread So Quickly Through Haiti," *National Geographic*, August 18, 2016, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2016/08/haiti-cholera-crisis-united-nations-admission/>

14 Ibid.

were taken in 2016, when the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, publicly apologized for the UN's role in the epidemic and declared that there would be a fund of USD\$400 million set up to help Haitian victims affected by the epidemic.¹⁵

Sexual Misconduct Allegations

UN responsibility in the cholera outbreak is also accompanied by allegations of sexual misconduct and sexual exploitation by UN peacekeepers. Paired with criticism over the peacekeepers' behavior resulting in the cholera outbreak, the additional sexual misconduct allegations raise concerns regarding the lack of supervision and control that the UN has over its personnel. The outbreak of cholera caused a distraction and enabled the peacekeepers to take advantage of the system. The UN expects every peacekeeper to adhere to a strict code of behavior and conduct; including respecting local customs and laws, treating the inhabitants of the host country with respect, and acting with integrity.¹⁶ However, those rules were ignored and, instead, UN peacekeepers in Haiti were accused of rape.

When sexual abuse by several UN peacekeepers in Haiti was brought forward, there was even more questioning over the ability and control of the international organization. In 2011, Jose Mujica, former Uruguayan President, made a public apology on behalf of Uruguayan UN peacekeeping troops who allegedly raped an eighteen-year-old Haitian young man. Additionally, less than a year later, the military court in Pakistan found two Pakistanis guilty for the rape of a fourteen-year-old Haitian boy who was 14 years old.¹⁷ More reports leaked in 2015 expressed those women were being exploited for sex by UN Peacekeepers in Haiti. At least 229 women were traded goods (such as medicine or food) and money in exchange for sex.¹⁸ In response to these sexual misconduct allegations, the UN established a fund that has

15 Andres Martinez Casares, "U.N. Peacekeeping Mission to Haiti Ends after 15 Years with Mixed Legacy," *Reuters*, October 15, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-haiti-politics-idUSKBN1WU2SP>

16 United Nations Peacekeeping, "Standards of Conduct Peacekeeping," *United Nations*, accessed December 19, 2020, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/standards-of-conduct>

17 Andres Martinez Casares, "U.N. Peacekeeping Mission to Haiti Ends after 15 Years with Mixed Legacy."

18 "UN peacekeepers leave Haiti: What is their legacy?" *Al Jazeera*, October 6, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/6/un-peacekeepers-leave-haiti-what-is-their-legacy>

grown to over USD\$1.5 million to help sexual abuse survivors worldwide. The international organization has set tighter protocols, investigations, and appropriate actions whenever an allegation is made. The current UN Secretary-General António Guterres treats sexual exploitation seriously and states:

As we serve the world's people and work for peace and the advancement of humanity, the United Nations must be a source of inspiration and a beacon of hope for all. Together, let us solemnly pledge that we will not tolerate anyone committing or condoning a crime, and in particular, crimes of sexual exploitation and abuse. **Let us make zero tolerance a reality.**¹⁹

Conclusion

The legitimacy of the UN was questioned due to the cholera outbreak in Haiti and the recent accusations of UN Peacekeepers' misconduct of sex exploitation. What could have been done to prevent workers in this international organization from being contaminated with a disease or carrying out misconduct? The United Nations has yet to take legal responsibility for the cholera outbreak, but there has been some improvement towards their accountability, waste management practices, and tightened restrictions on UN Peacekeeping conduct. *In this research*, possible solutions are suggested for managing disasters that have potentially destructive outcomes, preventive measures are introduced, and accountability within the organization to prevent worse outcomes are put forward.

While there are still issues regarding waste management protocols being ignored in some UN facilities, more awareness and procedures have been put in place to prevent further disasters. Mismanagement of fecal waste was found to be the root cause of the cholera outbreak and updated physical waste disposal measures could prevent the spread of disease in the future. It was suggested that the UN could administer education programs to increase awareness related to proper hygiene. Another prevention method is that all UN Peacekeepers must go through a medical physical and health assessment before deploying them to their mission country.

The UN received more criticism because several peacekeepers were accused and convicted of sexual exploitation in Haiti and other countries. The organization has since established funds for cholera victims in Haiti and victims

19 United Nations, "Standards of Conduct Peacekeeping."

of sexual exploitation. Convicted UN Peacekeepers have gone through the appropriate legal processes and issued public apologies towards the people of Haiti. Strict protocols were put in place for codes of conduct. Furthermore, the international organization has set even tighter protocols when accusations are made, to take appropriate actions as soon as allegations are charged.

The measures suggested in this research, if implemented, could help prevent diseases from exacerbating into future pandemics and could provide some useful ways for the UN to achieve higher levels of accountability. Additionally, if the UN publicly apologized for their part in the epidemic, they could set a precedent of taking responsibility for their actions, holding themselves accountable, as well as showing resolve in mitigating problems in the future.

Appendix

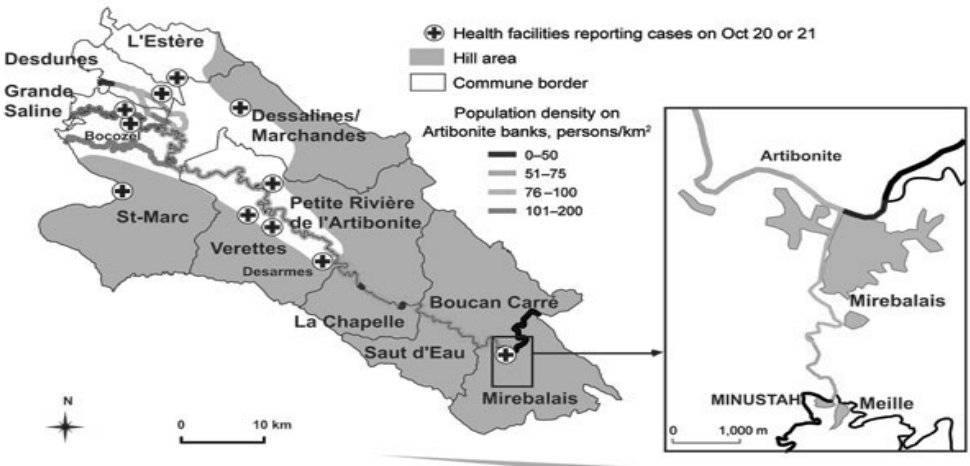


Figure 1: This is a map showing the first reported cases of Cholera soon after the peacekeepers arrived in October on the 9th, 12th, and 16th days. Source acquired Hanyi Piarroux et al., "Understanding the cholera epidemic, Haiti," *Emerging infectious diseases* 17, no. 7 (2011): 1161-1168.