



Reporting on **Cholera** from Amsterdam

Thursday, December 7, 2017

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Centuries ago, cholera used to claim the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in Europe. Governments back then didn't know what to do about the disease, so they preferred to keep quiet about outbreaks for fear of chaos and uprisings.

Unbelievable as it may seem, such a response can still be seen in 2017. While Sudan unquestionably has an outbreak of cholera, the country's leaders have been flatly denying there is an epidemic for a year now. The only independent media outlet openly reporting on cholera in Sudan is Radio Dabanga, which operates from Amsterdam. Doctors and journalists in the country who talk about the incidence of cholera are sacked, imprisoned and subjected to intimidation. The sad result is that the outbreak, which started in one spot in the Nuba mountains and could easily have been contained, has now spread across the entire country.

No action because of money

Radio Dabanga editor Sadeeq says, "Of course we have also thought about the government's refusal to acknowledge there's a cholera epidemic. We can't avoid the conclusion that it's simply a question of money. The government and the circles close to it earn vast amounts with the import and export of goods. That source of income would be threatened if the cholera epidemic were to be officially confirmed. It would mean closure of the borders with neighbouring countries and strict controls of people travelling into and out of the country. Al Bashir's regime definitely doesn't need this as it is already having to cope with a stagnating economy."

If you become infected by the cholera bacterium, you become incredibly thirsty, you get diarrhoea and stink of fish, you keep vomiting, your muscles contract involuntarily and you get heart palpitations. Severe dehydration is followed by liver failure, sometimes shock and death. Anyone who is infected and not treated can die within one to two days. Even if only one in five infected people go on to develop the disease, the rapid infection of large numbers of people leads to many victims. Yet we know that identifying and treating the disease should be a piece of cake. You can have the patient up and running again within a week by administering really simple, cheap treatments such as a salt solution (oral rehydration solution, or ORS), combined in some cases with antibiotics.

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'Watery diarrhoea'

Since August last year, the editorial team at Radio Dabanga in Amsterdam have been receiving messages suggesting that an outbreak of cholera could be imminent. Doctors in various parts of the country contacted the radio station back then with reports of hundreds of cases of what they called 'watery diarrhoea'. In September, dozens of fatalities were cited, mainly of babies under 12 months and the elderly, who are less resilient. The epidemic was gathering steam.

Taboo word

Sadeeq: "In August last year, we presented the dozens of messages from listeners about the disease symptoms to specialists in London. They said immediately that this was cholera. The evidence carried on accumulating after that. Of course, we make careful checks of the information from villages, hospitals and health centres. The reports often reach us via others because the people sending us the information don't want to become publicly known. The word 'cholera' is taboo for the regime and anyone using it risks being arrested. That has already happened many times."

Cholera outbreaks occur when the water is contaminated with excrement, there is a lack of sanitary facilities and people have to live at close quarters. If you drink that water, eat food that was washed in it or shake an infected hand, then you end up carrying the bacterium. That situation often occurs at present in the Sudanese refugee camps, where people are living on top of one another, and in places where the flows of water during the rainy season cannot be controlled or where water is scarce and has to be shared between large numbers of people and animals.

'Disease cheaper than bullets'

Sadeeq: "Refugees in the camps are convinced that the government has a deliberate strategy. After all, killing people by not taking action against cholera is cheaper than using weapons. It has even got to the point where the government is only allowing the aid organisations sporadic access to a hospital to deliver medicines while giving orders beforehand to that same hospital to send cholera patients home. That way, things don't look so bad but of course, once the patients are home again, they infect more people. The Minister of Health has even managed to claim that everything is under control and the number of patients is falling."

Whatsapp

Radio Dabanga does what it can to support the citizens of Sudan in their fight against the epidemic. The editorial team in Amsterdam keeps a vigilant eye every hour of the day on the WhatsApp group with listeners and citizens who provide them with information. Tips from all over the country about deaths, breeding grounds for infection and the availability of medicines are gathered, double-checked and then used as information in the broadcasts. Advice on hygiene is regularly transmitted. Dabanga uses its website, Facebook and Twitter for its reports in addition to its short-wave radio transmitters.

Radio Dabanga is the only independent source of news and information in the whole of Sudan. Free Press Unlimited set the broadcaster up in 2008 and still gives it support. We maintain contacts with donors and arrange the financial management. There are no independent media in Sudan. Criticizing the government or covering topics that are not to the taste of the country's leaders can result in all kinds of problems, ranging from bans on publication and the confiscation of newspaper issues to physical maltreatment and prison sentences. Dabanga's programmes are made in Amsterdam for safety reasons and then broadcast throughout Sudan. The station has recently started using WhatsApp to maintain contact with its readers. That gives it a great deal of direct information from rural areas, villages and towns that are not accessible to other media. More than two million people listen to the station every day. All of them people who have the right to know what the situation is in their country regarding infectious diseases and the right to hear and read what they can do to protect themselves.

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