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Cholera in Haiti? Send in the Marines

Gary Anderson

The Cholera outbreak in Haiti is an utterly avoidable disaster; and it is likely to be exacerbated by the approach of Hurricane Thomas, but it is one that can still be contained if we act quickly. Cholera is one of the world's most preventable diseases. It is primarily caused by drinking contaminated water although poor sanitation practices exacerbate it. The reason that this outbreak is so inexcusable is that billions have been poured into the country since the January earthquake and some of the most experienced disaster relief organizations in world are on the scene. These include OXFAM; which is probably the most experienced non-governmental organization in the world in dealing with clean water issues, and the United Nations Development Program which has a long history with such emergencies. One can only presume that the Haitian government, which has retaken the lead in recovery, got so consumed with rubble removal and rebuilding that it took its eye off the public health ball. This isn't the time to find fault; the disaster requires immediate help before this epidemic becomes a debacle.

Every natural disaster has two potential phases; be it a hurricane, tsunami, or an earthquake. The first stage of any operation is in the immediate aftermath of the disaster is the rescue and immediate recovery stage. The medical portion of this stage consists primarily in treating trauma and exposure. If triage is done properly, most deaths will be those victims who are beyond help. Those who get proper treatment will be on the road to recovery fairly quickly. The death rate will go dramatically down, usually in a week of a properly executed humanitarian assistance/disaster relief operation. The next stage is the onset of disease caused by poor water, bad sanitation; and in some cases, starvation if the first phase of the operation is not done properly. This stage can begin anywhere from two weeks to a year from the original event. In Haiti, it took nearly ten months after the earthquake. However, if water issues are properly dealt with in the first stage, the second need not occur.

In addition to being insidious, the second stage of such a disaster can have a long reach and will follow refugees from the epicenter to wherever they have escaped if camps have not been provided with proper water purification and sanitation facilities. This is exactly what happened in Haiti. Worse still, such diseases tend to double back to the larger population areas as people flee the original outbreak. Haiti's Artibonite region, where the initial outbreak occurred, is far north of the quake's epicenter. Preventing a disaster will take the kind of equipment and transportation capabilities that only the U.S. military can provide to prevent a debacle.

I have been involved in numerous disaster relief operations, but have only had to deal with the direct threat of Cholera once. From 2009 until early this year, I was the Senior Governance Advisor with a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Iraq's Abu Ghraib district where an outbreak had killed some twenty-five people in the outlying rural areas of the district in 2008. Heroic efforts by the U.S. Army and local officials contained the disease; in this case, the epidemic was largely man made through mismanagement of the irrigation canal system and the water filtration infrastructure, but the effect was similar to a natural disaster; and in 2009, we made a priority of preventing a recurrence. We did this by trucking in fresh water. This was an interim measure until we could set up a system of distribution of chlorine tablets to the families in the affected areas. Next, we followed up with a massive public information campaign on basic sanitation and how to use the tablets.

The situation in Haiti is on an order of magnitude greater than Abu Ghraib, but the principles of containment are still the same. However, there isn't much time. The United States should immediately offer to transport Reverse Osmosis Purification Units (ROWPUs) to Haiti; these units are capable of producing huge amounts of potable water out of the vilest sources imaginable. The Marines are particularly adept at using ROWPUs for humanitarian purposes. That is only a temporary solution until the relief international relief community can organize a solid system of chlorine tablet distribution and public information.

Containing a cholera outbreak is relatively easy; developing a sense of urgency among Haitian officials, may be more difficult. I'm usually the last to suggest yet another commitment of U.S. forces; but they wouldn't be there long, and aside from the ROWPUS, very few troops are needed. In this case, they are indispensable. Let's send in the Marines...again.

Gary Anderson is a retired Marine Corps officer. He is a veteran of disaster relief operations in Bangladesh, Somalia, and the Philippines. He has published several academic studies on humanitarian relief operations.

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