

OP-ED

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Righting a wrong in Haiti



Dr. Antonio Jean Baptiste checks on a new mom in the maternal cholera unit while on rounds at a special obstetrics clinic in Port-au-Prince. **PATRICK FARRELL**

BY BAN KI-MOON
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Last week, I addressed the U.N. General Assembly to outline a new approach to tackle cholera in Haiti — a disease that has afflicted nearly 800,000 people and claimed the lives of more than 9,000 Haitians over the last six years.

This tragedy has cast a shadow upon the relationship between the U.N. and the people of Haiti. It is a blemish on the reputation of U.N. peacekeeping and the organization world-wide.

I began my speech to the General Assembly with a message to the Haitian people:

The United Nations deeply regrets the loss of life and suffering caused by the cholera outbreak in Haiti. We apologize. The U.N. simply did not do enough with regard to the cholera outbreak and its spread in Haiti. We are profoundly sorry for our role.

In 2014, I traveled to Haiti to meet affected families. It was one of the most difficult journeys I have made across a decade as secretary-general. I heard stories of families who suffered, breadwinners who were lost, daughters and sons who are gone forever.

The people of Haiti have faced enormous hardships and obstacles over the years. Endemic poverty. Political instability. And, of course, the devastating earthquake of 2010. The cholera epidemic that soon followed added a deeper layer of tragedy and suffering.

There are no easy answers or perfect solutions to the challenges in Haiti. But that must not deter the members of the United Nations from fulfilling their collective and moral responsibility for action.

The U.N.'s new approach to tackling cholera is founded on two tracks, with costs amounting to approximately \$400 million over two years.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYoHfHvH0qQ>

Track One consists of an intensified effort to respond to, and reduce, the incidence of cholera in Haiti. That means improving people's access to care and treatment when sick, while also strengthening water, sanitation and health systems. This is the best long-term defense against cholera and other water-borne diseases.

Work on Track One is well under way. For example, the number of cholera rapid response teams has increased from 32 in April to 88 today. When there are reports of new cases, these teams work to provide immediate care within 48 hours and prevent further transmission. Vaccinations against cholera are also being provided to people in vulnerable areas.

The mission to eliminate cholera in Haiti is realistic and doable. Cholera is a treatable and preventable disease. Thanks to concerted international and Haitian efforts, the overall incidence of the disease has been reduced by approximately 90 per cent since its peak in 2011. What is standing in the way is adequate resources and means of delivery.

Our new approach also includes a second track focusing specifically on those Haitians most directly affected by cholera, their families and communities. Track Two is a concrete expression of the regret of our Organization for the suffering so many Haitians have endured.



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Photo/Eskinder Debebe

The approach would support communities and possibly individuals most severely affected by cholera and be based on priorities established through on-the-ground consultations.

This assistance could take many forms, including projects to alleviate the impacts of cholera and others that, while not directly related to cholera, reflect community needs such as education grants, micro-finance or other initiatives.

Whatever the eventual design of the package, a familiar obstacle once again stands in the way: adequate funding. Should resources not materialize, innovative financing solutions may need to be pursued.

My message to the General Assembly was clear: Without political will and financial support from the membership of the United Nations , we have only good intentions and words. Words are powerful — but they cannot replace action and material support.

So many people have suffered grievously. The United Nations and its members have the power to recognize and respond to that suffering. It is time for the international community to step up in solidarity, fulfill our moral duty and do the right thing for the Haitian people and the United Nations.

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