



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on January 13, 2012

UN Brings Virulent Cholera Strain to Haiti

As was reported then, microbiologists speculated that peacekeepers from Nepal had brought in cholera, and specifically a virulent strain distinctive to a region of Nepal. At the time, the United Nations had denied the connection, although more than one thousand Haitians had died from this form of cholera, and the disease was beginning to affect citizens of the Dominican Republic, who share the island of Hispaniola with Haiti.



Now, in [January 2012](#), Harvard Medical School researchers state that there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that Nepalese soldiers, brought in as peacekeepers by the United Nations, infected the Haitian population with a “super bug” strain of cholera. Haiti had never known a case of cholera until the Nepalese soldiers entered their country.

John Kekalanos, chair of the Microbiology and Molecular Genetics Department of Harvard Medical School, states: "What scares me is that the strain from South Asia has been recognized as more virulent, more capable of causing severe disease, and more transmissible. These strains are nasty. So far there has been no secondary outbreak. But Haiti now represents a foothold for a particularly dangerous variety of this deadly disease.... Cholera is a disease of the impoverished. When the standards of living are already at the lowest levels, cholera is a killer of historic proportions. If it spreads to other parts of the world, in those kinds of settings, I fear there will be a very high rate of death."

Renaud Piaroux, who conducted the research related to these cases for the Centers for Disease Control, concurs: "The scientific debate on the origin of cholera in Haiti existed, but it has been resolved by the accumulation of evidence that unfortunately leave no doubt about the implication of the Nepalese contingent of the UN peacekeeping mission in Haiti."

The death toll from this strain of cholera in Haiti alone has now reached 7,000 people and more than 500,000 Haitians have been infected with the disease. It gets worse. Cases of Haitians with this form of cholera have now been found in the Dominican Republic and Venezuela. Now cases are showing up in the cities of New York and Boston.

Unfortunately, officials at the United Nations seemed to ignore evidence of the origin of the cholera outbreak in Haiti. Assistant Secretary General Anthony Banbury said last summer that the UN wanted to know what caused the cholera outbreak, but that this contagion could not be tied to the United Nations peacekeepers. He said that the United Nations was "working very hard ... to combat the spread of the disease and bring assistance to the people. And that's what's important now.... The scientists say



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it can't be determined for certainty where it came from, so we don't know if it was the U.N. troops or not. That's the bottom line." As recently as last week, Anayansi Lopez, a UN spokeswoman, said that scientists had "determined it was not possible to be conclusive about how cholera was introduced into Haiti."

Scientists such as Mekalanos strongly disagree. He noted that a genetic analysis of the strain of cholera in Haiti showed that it was virtually identical to strains which caused cholera in Nepal around the time that the troops shipped out: "Almost any other explanation I can think of is well behind in confidence to the likelihood that that strain was introduced by UN troops."

Mark Weisbrot of the Center for Economic and Policy Research, which has been looking at relief efforts in Haiti, finds the attitude of the United Nations appalling: "It's outrageous for the UN to try to deny responsibility for bringing cholera to Haiti. Was it gross negligence on their part? This is one of the questions they won't have to answer if they can sweep this whole thing under the rug."

Louise C. Ivers, who specializes in infectious diseases at Harvard Medical School, saw firsthand the havoc caused by cholera in Haiti: "It was overwhelming. There were no reported cases in Haiti before 2010, ever. Really people had no idea what was happening. To hear the fear and the suspicions and the lack of understanding about how this was happening is very, very sad. The outbreak put a huge stress on what was already a very fragile health system. I'm afraid it will be a problem for the foreseeable future."

President Reagan once quipped that the most frightening words a person could hear were, "I'm from the government. I'm here to help you." The nightmare in Haiti suggests that there is a topper even to Reagan's quip, which would be, "I'm from the United Nations. I'm here to help you."



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