

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC, CHAD, NIGER: MENINGITIS EPIDEMIC

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Red Cross volunteers in all three countries are organising awareness sessions targeting the public in affected areas and are supporting government vaccination campaigns and efforts to control the epidemic. Support for the Appeal has enabled the despatch of 200,000 doses of vaccines to each of the three countries.

The context

Since December 1999, there have been outbreaks of meningococcal meningitis in several countries in the region, resulting in an epidemic in the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad and Niger. By mid April, as the epidemic peaked, there were significant numbers of cases in all three countries.

In Chad, the number of people affected by the epidemic had reached 4,500 with 602 deaths, the worst-affected regions of East Logone, West Logone, Moyen Chari and Mayo Kebi bearing the heaviest toll.

In the Central African Republic, 1,200 cases and 206 deaths have been recorded and although the arrival of the rainy season has halted the epidemic in Bangui in the south of the country, the Central Eastern and Central Western areas remain exposed. Furthermore, a severe dry spell continues in the north of the country, prompting the spread of the epidemic.

In Niger, the epidemic has resulted in 250 deaths and 2,815 officially-recorded cases according to a report issued on 4th April by the government. The epidemic is particularly severe in the capital, Niamey, where 1,072 cases and 75 deaths have been recorded, a mortality rate of 8.8%. The epidemic has also hit the regions of Kirni N'Konni, close to the border with Nigeria, and Tera which is on the border with Burkina Faso.

Latest events

The Red Cross of Benin has reported an outbreak of meningitis over the month of April which has affected most particularly the Departments of Atacora and Le Borgou. Atacora has recorded 529 cases of meningitis, with 28 deaths and Le Borgou has reported 474 cases with 35 deaths. The National Rapid

Intervention team has worked to ensure provision of vaccines and oily chloramphenicol and has stepped up vaccination initiatives, with the result that the epidemic is now waning.

Campaigns have begun in the Central African Republic, Chad and Niger in order to treat those having contracted meningitis and to vaccinate the populations most at risk in all three countries. In Niger, the government has embarked on a campaign in the three worst-affected regions, for which a total of 4,700,000 doses of vaccine are required. The efficiency of the campaigns has been enhanced through the social mobilisation and awareness-raising work carried out by the National Societies.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

In all three countries, the National Societies were involved at an early stage in the meningitis operation. Volunteers from isolated villages were the first to draw the attention of the health authorities of Chad and the Central African Republic to the outbreak of the disease. The Federation has funded a supply of medicines which reached Bangui and N'Djamena on 21st and 22nd April respectively, while 200,000 doses of meningitis vaccines arrived in the Central African Republic on 26th April and in Chad on 28th April.

Central African Republic w

In the Central African Republic, the National Society was entrusted by the Ministry of Health with the content of radio messages to raise awareness of the populations of the affected regions. The Red Cross branches organised intensive refresher courses for volunteers working on the meningitis operation, while other volunteers were involved in collecting data for epidemiological surveillance purposes. The vaccination campaign is co-ordinated by the Ministry of Public Health which is also in charge of the cold chain. The National Society provides support in terms of awareness work within the affected communities and also for logistics. In the Central Western area, 45,600 persons between 2 and 50 years old have been vaccinated over a five day period. A second team will leave shortly for the east of the country to carry out vaccination in the zones where the disease has struck. The National Society has been assisted in the vaccination of 300 volunteers from its Headquarters following the death of one of its volunteers.

Chad w

Vaccines have now been transported to the affected regions and vaccination work has begun. In addition, in regions where the Ministry of Health and Médecins sans Frontières are carrying out vaccination campaigns, volunteers are providing support through the organisation of awareness sessions.

Niger w

Since 7th April, the Red Cross Society of Niger has been working at Lazaret hospital, a temporary structure which is overwhelmed by an influx of patients who are being treated for meningitis in crowded and unsanitary conditions. With a total of twenty volunteers, the National Society has worked to improve standards of hygiene and to prevent the further outbreak of diarrhoeal and other diseases. The National Society has also begun to conduct awareness sessions on the symptoms of meningitis and prevention in the worst-affected areas of the capital. The Federation has provided 500 posters, an information guide on meningitis epidemics and 4,000 brochures dealing with the prevention of meningitis.

Funds were lacking for the provision of vaccines. However, following the recent confirmation of additional contributions, 200,000 doses of vaccine can now be forwarded to assist the Ministry of Health in its vaccination campaign, to be carried out with the support of the Red Cross Society of Niger. The vaccines are due to reach Niger on 14th May.

An expanded awareness campaign aims to provide information to 30 percent of the population in three regions; it will target particularly the youth and women with market stalls. Fifteen first aiders from three branches will be involved in the awareness work which will take place over a three month period. The

campaign seeks to raise awareness of potential epidemics and the link with sanitation and a clean environment. A member of West Africa's Surveillance Team will travel to Niger in order to work with the National Society once the vaccines arrive.

Outstanding needs

A shortfall in contributions remains. Funding is needed to ensure the staging of an evaluation workshop once the operations have been concluded. The purpose of this evaluation, to be held in co-ordination with external partners, is to examine how best measures can be improved and co-ordination reinforced in order to maximise preparedness for epidemics. Considering that the outbreak of the disease is an annual phenomenon in the meningitis belt, reinforced preparedness at National Society level could save many lives.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

Good co-ordination mechanisms are in place in the Central African Republic, Chad and Niger in order to halt the spread of the epidemic. The Ministry of Health, the WHO and NGOs are working hand in hand with the National Societies and the Federation in order to ensure the success of the operations. The media have also actively participated in the operation through the dissemination of awareness messages to the population.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

The vaccines and medicines forwarded by the Federation have supplemented the supplies available with the Ministry of Health in the three countries. Despite the difficulties in reaching certain isolated villages, vaccination sessions must be carried out in the areas where the disease is occurring. The National Red Cross Societies, through their volunteer networks, are playing an important role in raising awareness in the worst-affected regions, and in targeting and mobilising populations most at risk.

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