

TAJIKISTAN: TYPHOID OUTBREAK

28 February, 1997

INFORMATION BULLETIN no. 1
period covered: February 1997

The emergency

Typhoid outbreaks are now an annual occurrence in Tajikistan, especially in urban areas where sewage and water supply systems are in a state of serious disrepair. Such outbreaks have usually started with the arrival of spring, but this year cases of typhoid fever were noted at the beginning of February, leading to forecasts that the disease will escalate out of control with warmer weather in the months to come.

Tajikistan is in the throes of a civil conflict which has hindered any attempts by the authorities to soften the impact of the hardships that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. The country is in a state of desperate poverty, with a large segment of the population surviving on handouts by international humanitarian agencies. It does not have the millions of dollars needed to repair the sewage and water systems. Fifteen reservoirs supply water to the city of Dushanbe. About 40 per cent of these water pipes have breaks and leaks, posing a serious problem where water and sewage pipes lie side by side.

Besides typhoid, a number of other diseases previously absent in Tajikistan have recently reappeared. In 1995 there was a cholera epidemic of 15,000 cases and in 1996, ten years after the last significant outbreak, malaria returned with a total of about 100,000 cases.

This year's typhoid outbreak is already putting severe strain on Tajikistan's health services. By the end of this month all available hospitals in the capital Dushanbe were filled to capacity with 2,600 registered patients. About the same number of patients were reported to be sick at home. Some 44 per cent of the hospital patients were children under the age of 14.

Between 18 and 24 February, an average of 117 typhoid cases were being admitted to hospital per day, and many more were believed to be coming down with the disease at home. The authorities ordered the closure of vegetable markets for a few days and on 24 February closed all schools in Dushanbe for two weeks. By 24 February, 33 people were reported to have died of the disease in hospital, but it was feared that more than 50 had died at home.

From mid February onwards, the epidemic began spreading beyond Dushanbe city to outlying villages and to the regions north, east and south of Dushanbe. The following table gives the number of patients in hospitals throughout the affected areas as of 25 February.

(The number of patients at home is unknown but is estimated at around 10,000 - 15,000. Estimates of the total number of likely cases during this outbreak range between 20,000 and 25,000.)

District	Hospital patients 25/2/97
Hissar	117
Leninsky	180
Kafarnigan	700
Turzunzade	61
Kafarnigan	700
Yavan	320
Varzob	47
Shakhrinai	53
Tajikabad	75
Dushanbe (on 24/2/97)	2,575
Tajikistan total	4,828

Typhoid fever is transmitted through food and water contaminated by the faeces and urine of patients and carriers. A small proportion of cases become permanent carriers. Untreated mortality rates are between 10 and 20 per cent. In 1996, a typhoid outbreak in Kulyab affected at least 6,595 people, killing 877, giving a fatality rate of 13.3 per cent.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

On 13 February, the Tajikistan Red Crescent Society contacted the Federation's Regional Delegation for Central Asia, giving the latest figures on the outbreak in the capital and asking for a range of medical supplies to help hospitals combat the problem. In response the Delegation immediately undertook a number of initiatives:

- One million chloramine tablets, to purify drinking water, are being purchased
- Ten metric tonnes of chlorine have been transported to Dushanbe and 1.2 mt donated to city authorities
- Ten tonnes of wheat flour and vegetable oil, donated by ECHO through the Swedish Red Cross, have been distributed to hospitals in Dushanbe
- 800 kilos of liquid soap from the Finnish Red Cross have been distributed to hospitals in Dushanbe
- 10,080 soap bars from the Netherlands Red Cross have been distributed in Dushanbe
- 100,000 information flyers on hygiene have been printed and distributed and a second batch is planned
- 300 mattresses, blankets and bedlinen sets have been distributed
- approximately 24,000 tablets of cotrimoxazole (250mg), 40,000 tablets of cotrimoxazole (80mg), 40,000 tablets of cotrimoxazole (20mg), 12,000 tablets of tetracycline (250mg) and 3,000 vials of gentamycin (40mg/ml) are being held in readiness for treatment of typhoid cases, plus 15,000 syringes and needles
- video clips with health messages for screening on TV and similar information for daily radio broadcasts are being prepared
- information on hygiene is given out daily in public places by megaphone by the Tajikistan Red Crescent.

Distribution of supplies is being done in close collaboration with the Tajikistan Red Crescent Society.

All these initiatives have been co-ordinated with the participants in the daily crisis meetings organised by the government of Tajikistan for representatives of the main international agencies and the health authorities, which the Delegation has regularly attended. At an agency co-ordination meeting today (28 February) it was decided that the Federation would take the lead co-ordinating role.

Further Response

Taking into account the scale of the outbreak at present, it is planned to provide hospitals with the following quantities of supplies, intended to cover needs during the next six months, as soon as possible:

- toilet paper	72,000 rolls
- bars of soap	42 mt
- detergent	24 mt
- thermometers	3,000
- syringes	60,000
- disinfectant	72 mt
- bedlinen sets	7,200
- blankets	3,600
- mattresses	3,600
- uniforms for additional nurses	600
- pillows	3,600
- kitchen pots	120.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

From the outset of the emergency, the Federation Delegation has been active in contacting potential donors, informing the media on the situation and co-ordinating its action with the Tajik government and the main international agencies in Tajikistan. Steps taken include:

- News Updates issued to main international news agencies on 19 and 21 February
- Information letter issued 25 February to 12 Embassies in Almaty
- Attendance at daily meetings of the "Typhoid Committee" of health authorities and main NGOs
- Interviews for Reuters, AFP, Radio France International, Reuters TV.

Contributions

Substantial donor support, including a DM 25,000 donation from the German Embassy in Dushanbe and a USD 25,000 donation from USAID in Almaty, plus applications for funding that are in process, looks set to cover current needs. The launching of a Federation appeal is therefore not foreseen at the moment. If needs increase, donors may be approached individually.

Conclusion

The unusually early start to the annual typhoid outbreak in Tajikistan is an ominous sign that the disease may spiral out of control in the coming months, unless effective prevention measures are taken. Preventing infection is the key to management of the situation, as laboratory tests show clinical and microbiotic resistance to the main antibiotics available in Tajikistan. However, the current large caseload also creates a need for considerable quantities of medical supplies. Federation efforts will aim at addressing both issues.

National Societies will be kept up to date on developments in the situation. In the meantime, for further information please contact Desk Officer Martin Faller, tel: (0041) (22) 73.04.424 or Programme Assistant Federica Morosoli, tel: (0041) (22) 73.04.454.

Martin Faller
Desk Officer
Europe Department

Renny Nancholas
Director
Europe Department