

## **Indonesia ignoring cholera outbreak**

*Norman Voss*

Shocking health conditions and deaths from cholera are being reported in Indonesia's most resource-rich region. As of last weekend, 173 deaths had been reported among the indigenous people in the eastern province of Papua. The victims suffered severe diarrhea, which have been confirmed to be caused by cholera.

The epidemic is spread through contaminated water or food and can lead to death within a few days. Papua, whose indigenous population experienced serious hardships during the Suharto regime and continues to suffer severe human rights violations, has now been struck by a major health disaster. Yet the Indonesian government is not providing sufficient support.

Local church groups have been recording cholera cases in the Kamuu valley in the district of Dogiyai. They have tried to alert authorities, including the Health Department in the nearby city of Nabire, ever since the first cases were discovered in April this year.

Indigenous Papuans are forced to rely on the support of local non-governmental groups while the health authorities continue to ignore the situation. The Ministry of Health has so far acknowledged only 87 deaths among 575 cases of infection. Organizations in Papua are calling for urgent help.

The epidemic is likely to spread and there is imminent danger of further deaths. Urgent prevention measures are required, which include the provision of means for proper disposal of fecal waste, treatment of sewage, the decontamination of water supplies and public health education.

Indonesia was the starting point for a major cholera pandemic called "El Tor" that began in 1961 and spread over the following decade to other countries including Bangladesh, India, the Soviet Union and Italy.

The ongoing deaths have brought despair and desperation among the affected communities, and frustration over official negligence has already resulted in riots. An outbreak of violence in the town of Moanemani is an indicator of the thin level of trust between the indigenous population and the administration in the provinces.

Distrust and suspicion are largely a result of government policies put in place to exploit the rich natural environment. During the Suharto regime, a transmigration policy brought innumerable migrants from other parts of Indonesia to Papua, whose population is largely Christian. Many of the migrants to arrive were Muslim traders.

Over the years the migrant population has risen to 40 per cent. The resulting inflow of business and different culture are felt as an attack on the indigenous culture and habitat of the local people. Tensions have in the past sparked riots and even independence movements, which faced serious repercussions from the armed forces, including the arrest and torture of many suspects.

Papua has enormous natural resources, but the indigenous people have not benefitted much from them. Timber and minerals are the main export resources, and the activities of logging and mining companies are destroying both the environment and the local way of life. The exploitation of natural resources plays mainly into the hands of the migrant traders, with indigenous people largely ignored.

Indonesian Social Welfare Minister Aburizal Bakrie told a delegation from the World Council of Churches that under democracy, internal migrants cannot be stopped from moving to Papua, where their skills and talents make it easy for them to dominate the more "backward" societies.

It seems however that under Indonesian democracy the violation of rights by the army, the police and the Ministry of Health also cannot be stopped.

Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Andri Hadi has admitted that the transmigration policies of the past were a wrong approach and are the cause of many problems the Papuans are facing today.

But what is needed most now, is a serious reaction from the health authorities to control the cholera epidemic and prevent its spread into the neighboring district of Paniai. Medicine, doctors and proper waste disposal teams need to be equipped and sent to the region.

So far, in the most resourceful region that creates major income for the state, not even basic standards of healthcare have been provided to prevent what could become a major epidemic.

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