

Nigeria: Health sector needs N8.2bn to address humanitarian crisis

As part of the overall 2016 Humanitarian Response Plan under review by WHO), \$25 million or N8.2 billion is required to address funding gaps in Nigeria's health sector.

The global watchdog, yesterday, raised fresh alarm about the humanitarian crisis in the country, decrying appalling health situations in 15 Borno State Local Government Areas (LGAs) formerly held by insurgents. It also disclosed that more than half of the health facilities in the state's most affected communities are non-functional.

It announced, however, that its emergency team arrived August 19, 2016 in Maiduguri, Borno State, to assess and respond to the health needs of 800,000 people in the troubled region. "The working environment in the affected areas is extremely challenging. Resources and capacities to meet the enormous health service gaps are grossly inadequate. Insecurity is a major constraint, with a number of recent attacks on humanitarian staff by insurgents. The annual wet season is also peaking and there are forecasts of major floods in the coming weeks. Access to the 15 LGAs require military escort over long distances on poor roads.

"Nonetheless, WHO and its partners are taking immediate steps to tackle these issues head-on. WHO has already deployed expert staff to Nigeria for emergency operations, coordination, and data management. Another team is on the ground in Borno State to help with the polio outbreak response. The government has already launched emergency polio vaccination activities, with support from WHO and partners. The first round of vaccinations will soon be completed, targeting one million children. Subsequent large-scale polio immunization rounds are planned before November.

WHO has also dispatched emergency drugs and supplies, while the organization's emergency operations will be further reinforced by an expanded, experienced response team in coming days," it said.

Health crisis intensifying in Nigeria's Borno State – The Lancet Vol 388 August 13, 2016

Experts are warning that the health and humanitarian situation in Borno State, northeast Nigeria, is likely to worsen in the coming months unless aid reaches people. Talha Burki reports.

The crisis in Nigeria's Borno State, home to 4 million people, has been building for a long time. The northeast of Nigeria has historically been neglected, underdeveloped, and scarcely governed. It was in this context that the militants emerged. Boko Haram, one of the world's deadliest terrorist groups, began its insurgency in Borno State in 2009. At its height, it had seized territory roughly the size of Belgium. It razed villages and abducted thousands of women and children. The mayhem spread to neighbouring states, and spilled over the border to Cameroon, Chad, and Niger.

Civilians have been caught in the middle. "The security response to Boko Haram has never been about civilian protection", stated Elizabeth Donnelly from the Chatham House's Africa Programme in London, UK. "It has always been about trying to crush the insurgency." People in areas conquered by the insurgency were considered suspect by the authorities. Amnesty International has accused the Nigerian armed forces of an array of war crimes, including at least 1200 extrajudicial killings and thousands of arbitrary detentions, many of which ended in death. Nigerians thought to sympathise with the authorities were subject to attack from Boko Haram.

The economy of the northeast has been severely disrupted. Agriculture, fishing, and cattle herding have more or less ground to a halt. For at least 2 years, farmers have been unable to plant crops. The border crossings have been closed, cutting off trade with neighbouring nations. "There is a total absence of resources—people have not been able to produce food, and they have become totally dependent on the state and humanitarian aid agencies", Donnelly told The Lancet.

In 2014, Boko Haram kidnapped 279 schoolgirls from a town in southern Borno State (most of the girls have still not been recovered). Later in the year, it declared a caliphate, and, in 2015, it pledged allegiance to Islamic State. Since then, the group has been on the retreat. "The reason we have any information about the humanitarian needs in Borno is because of military successes in pushing back Boko Haram and recapturing most of the local government areas", explains Donnelly. Boko Haram no longer controls any towns in Borno State, but it is far from defeated. Instead of attempting to regain territory, the militants now favour destructive raids. Earlier this year, they attacked the village of Dalori, laying fires, detonating bombs, and shooting civilians. The Nigerian authorities said that at least 85 people died.

Security concerns mean that the 2.2 million internally displaced Nigerians are unlikely to be able to return to their homes any time soon. 1.2 million internally displaced people (IDPs) have fled to Maiduguri, state capital of Borno. Mostly they live in the community; about 100 000 people live in the dozen or so camps dotting the outskirts of the city. Hospitals and infrastructure have been overwhelmed. UNICEF has warned that more than 2 million Nigerians are in desperate need of humanitarian assistance. They estimate that 244 000 children in Borno State will have severe acute malnutrition this year, 49 000 of whom will die unless aid reaches them. Most of Borno is too dangerous to visit without an armed escort, but Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) was recently able to gain entry to a handful of IDP camps. They found extremely high severe acute malnutrition in children. The Bama camp of 24 000 people had seen at least 188 deaths in the previous month, mostly from diarrhoeal diseases and malnutrition.

“There has been huge mortality over the past 6 months”, affirms MSF’s Hugues Robert. “There is a striking lack of food, and widespread malnutrition.” The approaching rainy season brings the risk of malaria. Nigeria is officially free of polio, but two-thirds of Borno State was not covered by a vaccination campaign in October, 2015. The state has already seen large outbreaks of measles and cholera. “It is a very serious situation in terms of access to health care, nutrition, food security, and access to clean and safe water”, notes Haja Kamara, head of the International Committee of the Red Cross’s sub delegation in Maiduguri. A UN-led US\$279 million humanitarian appeal for Nigeria for 2016 has not even reached a third of its target. Security is the key limitation. The army is able to arrange regular convoys to bring in supplies, but otherwise Borno State is entirely disconnected. “Already overstretched security forces are now being tasked with delivering humanitarian relief—it does not make for an efficient system”, said Donnelly. IDPs are restricted to areas near armed forces. But 2 million people who are not displaced are thought to be inaccessible. “Nobody knows what is going on outside the cities”, said Robert. “It is one of the most worrying factors of the crisis.

Talha Burki

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