

Displaced population in Diffa faces serious gaps in healthcare

Niger's Diffa region has long been facing serious gaps in the provision of health care for its more than half a million citizens. The influx of an estimated 60,000 displaced persons has further aggravated this situation. Aid agencies are mobilizing efforts to salvage the situation but serious gaps remain: Save the Children, funded by European Unions' humanitarian office, ECHO, is focusing on malnutrition through a community care approach and addressing acute cases of malnutrition and reducing morbidity and mortality .

This article is about the situation around Lake Chad which has since the beginning of 2014 witnessed an influx of displaced persons fleeing the conflict in northern Nigeria. They have chosen the islands and shores of Lake Chad as sanctuary in search of arable land for agriculture and other economic activities like fishery. In March 2014, UNHCR and its partner, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) identified some 1615 households of 10,436 persons who settled on 17 islands of Lake Chad (Niger territory). The increasing population is mounting pressure on the available socio-economic infrastructure as a whole, and the few available health structures in particular which are now stretched beyond yawning capacity.

“Self-Medication” instead of healthcare

An evaluation team found that in the absence of health services, the people indulged in the practice of reckless self-medication; a practice that endangered their lives and worsen their health situation. Many of the displaced, especially children, had never been vaccinated and there were reported cases of measles on the 17 islands which are located within the administrative locality of the Bosso Integrated Health Centre.

The Mobile Clinic steps in.

In order to rapidly address the emergency situation, the Health District with the support of the IRC organised a month-long mobile clinic caravan from April 10 to May 5, 2014 on the Islands to improve upon the health of the displaced populations and indigenous people living on the islands. They conducted medical and nutritional screening of malnourished children between 6-59 months, pregnant and lactating women; provided preventive and curative drugs to the population, distributed condoms, and conducted prenatal consultations. The mobile clinic equally increased the existing drug stocks.

The dominant pathologies included digestive disorders, diarrhea, malaria, and acute respiratory infections especially in children. In all, 555 persons were consulted on the Islands; 322 female and 284 children of less than 5 years. It required the services of seven medical personnel to accomplish the assignment: two medical doctors (including the chief medical officer of the Diffa health district) senior technicians in obstetrics care, three nurses and a communicator.

According to the IRC protection coordinator Mr Kouassi Dagawa, the health situation of the islands has improved. However, the population on the islands is still increasing partly due to new arrivals from Nigeria and because displaced persons from other areas of Diffa flock to the islands in search of livelihood opportunities. The increasing population on the islands and the

prevailing situation necessitates more humanitarian assistance. With the advent of the rainy season health risks are also mounting and prospects are worse.

Everything being equal, two vaccination campaigns coupled with medical screening are expected to be held in August and September 2014 on the 17 islands. IRC says it is urgent to organize regular mobile clinic campaigns on the islands and UNHCR, its operational and financial partners have just secured more than 1 million USD from the CERF, the New York-based central emergency UN fund to reinforce the response in Diffa, including the mobile clinics. “Given the prevailing situation on the islands, this activity appears very important especially to prevent and treat certain diseases before we are caught up in epidemic or other serious public health problems” concludes Mr. Kouassi Dagawa.

UNHCR Headquarters in Geneva and Niamey also dispatched their health specialists to other areas of Diffa to assess the situation in view of stepping up the activities.

UNHCR’s strategy

According to Mr. Nigel Person, UNHCR Geneva –based Senior Health Officer who was on mission in Niger, serious gaps exist in the nutrition, health and WASH sectors especially on the Lake Chad Islands notably with regards to drinking water and medical screening for children. UHNCR is currently working on a project to integrate refugee health issues into the national health system. “With regards to these issues, UNHCR will be carrying out advocacy aimed at providing durable solutions to health problems” Mr. Person concluded. In the meantime, discussions are also underway with other NGOs to deploy to Diffa as these gaps cannot be closed alone by agencies, such as IRC, ICRC and Save the Children, already working in the area.

FIN