El Niño and health
PACIFIC ISLANDS overview - January 2016

EL NIÑO FORECAST AND HUMANITARIAN CONSEQUENCES

• El Niño-induced drought in the Pacific Islands is projected to extend in the first quarter of 2016, with continuing effects on food availability and water quantity and quality in Vanuatu, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Samoa, and Tonga until mid-2016. It is expected to affect 4.3 million people in 13 Pacific countries (including 2.4 million in PNG). Diarrhoeal diseases are likely to increase due to the scarcity of potable water compounded by poor water infrastructure.

• An above-normal Pacific cyclone season expected from November 2015 until April 2016, and heavy rains projected in the eastern Pacific are likely to cause flooding, related humanitarian consequences and destruction of health infrastructure.

CURRENT AND PROJECTED HEALTH CONDITIONS

• In Vanuatu, water shortage and lack of sanitation are creating alarming food, nutrition and health conditions especially in communities affected by cyclone Pam in 2015. An increase in the number of cases of diarrhoeal diseases has been recorded recently. In Fiji, 67 000 people are now reliant on water delivery. There are increasing concerns that consequences of the drought will also be felt in Tonga and Samoa. In Solomon Islands, more than 2000 cases of diarrhoea have been reported so far with the outbreak spreading from the capital to the provinces. An outbreak of rotavirus has claimed the lives of four children.

• Decreased water quantity and quality may also lead to an increased incidence of vector-borne diseases such as dengue and malaria. Fiji is particularly vulnerable to dengue outbreaks, especially in areas with poor water and sanitation infrastructure such as squatter settlements and poor neighbourhoods in and around Suva (which had previously experienced one of the largest outbreaks recorded in the Pacific in 2013-14). Tuvalu also faced a drought-induced outbreak of diarrhoeal disease in 2011.

• Projected cyclones and flooding may also destroy and damage health facilities, disrupt the provision of health services and create the conditions for epidemics of water-borne diseases such as diarrhoeal diseases and leptospirosis. For instance, in 2014, floods triggered an epidemic of diarrhoeal disease in the Solomon Islands. Disasters may also lead to population displacement and overcrowding, with a higher risk of transmissible disease outbreaks and create psychosocial impacts on affected populations.

INFORM index*
Fiji 100
Kiribati 50
Samoa 144
Solomon Islands 24
Tonga 95
Vanuatu 42

*INFORM (Index for Risk Management) is a global risk assessment index for humanitarian crises and disasters: http://www.inform-index.org/
HEALTH PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE ACTIONS

• In Vanuatu and Fiji, National Disaster Management Offices are monitoring situations of drought in affected districts and provinces. WHO supports the Ministry of Health in planning the rapid assessments of healthcare facilities, to carry out malnutrition screenings in local villages and to conduct risk assessments. Based on preliminary health risk assessments, the Health Clusters in Fiji and Vanuatu are supporting health preparedness and response activities:
  - Establishing El Niño response task forces or committees;
  - Awareness raising and information sharing with partners and media;
  - Mapping water points and vulnerable agricultural areas;
  - Providing water storage support and prepositioning of emergency supplies;
  - Drafting drought management plans including emergency water carting.

• In the Solomon Islands, if recent rains have brought some relief, there remains food security concerns after crops failures as a result of cyclones, floods and drought conditions in 2015. The National Emergency Operations Centre has activated an internal mechanism to monitor the impacts of drought and is in contact with all the Provincial Health Authorities. The Ministry of Health is developing its key health messages on drought-related health effects. The WASH Cluster is leading the current response. A WHO epidemiologist is supporting investigations into a recent diarrhoea outbreak in Honiara and Guadalcanal Provinces.
  - Samoa and Kiribati have drought-standing committees, which are assembling awareness plans and gathering data on drought progression. Palau is considering drafting a drought plan.
  - In Tonga, the Government has developed a draft drought plan, and the Ministry of Health is installing 10,000 litre water storage tanks in selected hospitals with WHO support.
  - The Pacific Humanitarian Team (PHT) Health and Nutrition Cluster is preparing a short survey about national health responses across the region on El Niño. It will ask whether Ministries of Health have put in place additional contingency plans, surveillance or supplies. The survey results will be published together with the public health risk assessment in February 2016.

• WHO has deployed technical surge capacities to support immediate response assistance and public health risk assessments in Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu.

• WHO and UNICEF are coordinating PHT Health and Nutrition Cluster for preparedness action for the upcoming cyclone season.