In light of the massive destruction and the health risks posed by the super typhoon Haiyan, WHO is immediately deploying 21 health and emergency experts and medical supplies to support health authorities to address the needs of the over 9.5 million persons affected. WHO is seeking immediate financial support in the amount of US$ 2.8 million in advance of the inter-agency flash appeal that will be released shortly.

Current Situation and health risks

Super typhoon Haiyan, locally known as Yolanda, made its first landfall at 4:40 a.m. on 8 November in Eastern Samar province of the Philippines, moving on to the province of Leyte, with maximum winds of 235 km per hour where it had devastating effects, and ultimately causing destruction in 36 provinces. According to Philippine Red Cross, over 1,200 persons have been killed, while some media estimates put the figure at over 10,000. Over 618,000 are displaced in 1,458 evacuation centres.

Tacloban city, with a population of over 250,000, is one of the worst hit areas. The authorities have informed that basic infrastructure has been largely destroyed, with most roads impassable and limited access to inland areas. There is reportedly very limited water and food, and no electricity in Tacloban. Incidents of looting and violence have been reported. Other areas where major devastation has been inflicted are Samar Province and parts Iloilo and Cebu islands.

The immediate health risks are complications of injuries (e.g., death, infection, tetanus, disability), the spread of waterborne diseases such as cholera, Shigella, hepatitis and Leptospirosis, as a result of the breakdown of water and sanitation infrastructure. Overcrowding and displacement can contribute to outbreaks of diseases such as measles that can have serious complications in vulnerable children. Efforts will be required to prevent and control vector-borne diseases such as malaria, dengue, Japanese encephalitis, to avoid a potential increase in their incidence. Reproductive health services also need significant support, especially considering that thousands of women will continue to give birth – with at least 15% expected to have complications – in a setting where health services have been substantially depleted. In the longer term, there is likely to be an increase in mental health conditions, malnutrition, childhood diseases, and complications of chronic diseases due to difficulties accessing health care.

Health priorities

The Government of the Philippines has requested support to restore telecommunications and critical infrastructure, deliver food and water and deploy medical and forensic teams, field hospitals and medical supplies. Although assessments are ongoing and no detailed information is yet available, there are reports of health facilities having been severely damaged and even washed away, and patients in lower floors having drowned. It is expected that many health workers have themselves been affected by the typhoon and will be unable to provide support. One of the main concerns is the number of people suffering injuries that urgently require treatment, including surgery, antibiotics, and tetanus prophylaxis. The Department of Health (DOH) has warned of the alarming low stocks of tetanus immunoglobulin which is urgently needed.

The Health Cluster, which was already activated for the humanitarian responses in Mindanao and Bohol, is convening on Monday 11 November under the leadership of the DOH and WHO.
WHO will be supporting the development of the joint health response strategy and action plan with DOH and Health Cluster partners. It will also provide support for the coordination of field hospitals and foreign medical teams (FMTs) and for the restoration of national health system for basic emergency services.

A multisectoral approach will be taken especially with WASH, nutrition, food aid, shelter, and logistics clusters to address the main causes of morbidity and mortality.

WHO response operations

In light of the scale and complexity of this emergency, WHO has categorized this event as grade 3 – the highest internal emergency category - and is mobilizing organization-wide support for the country. WHO has joined the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) team already deployed to Tacloban. Following WHO’s Emergency Response Framework (ERF) procedures, a an experienced and pre-qualified senior health officer has been deployed to assist WHO’s Representative in the management of field operations. The Global Health Cluster and the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN) have also been activated to mobilize support.

The Organization has two emergency teams currently deployed in Zamboanga, providing support to people displaced by civil unrest in the area, and another team providing health support to the population affected by the earthquake that hit Bohol in October. In addition WHO is fielding 21 health and emergency experts to seven locations, including Tacloban, Roxas, Samar and Cebu. The hubs will be staffed with emergency teams composed of a Health Cluster Coordinator, an Information Management Officer, a Public Health Officer and a Logistics/ Administrative Officer.

An initial shipment of four emergency kits with medicines and supplies to cover basic health needs of 120,000 persons during one month and supplies to perform 400 surgical interventions is being deployed. Four diarrhoeal diseases kits with medicines and supplies to treat 3000 cases of acute diarrhoea are also being shipped. In the coming days additional medical supplies to support over two million people will be procured and distributed to the affected areas.

WHO will also support DOH in urgently strengthening the early warning alert and response network to rapidly detect and prepare for disease outbreaks and other public health threats related to food and environmental hazards. A Level-3 capable Health Cluster Coordinator and an Information Management Officer skilled in GIS will be assigned to the DOH’s emergency operations centre. WHO and its partners will also provide guidance to the DOH on the reception and deployment of foreign medical teams, including field hospitals.

An assessment of damage to health services will be carried out to inform a coordinated health emergency response and to prepare for recovery and reconstruction.

Funding requirements

WHO needs immediate financial support in the amount of US$ 2.8 million for the deployment of emergency health staff and medical supplies and to support coordination and field operations. An inter-agency flash appeal will be issued in the coming days under the leadership of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

WHO’s rapid deployment of health experts and supplies to the Philippines has been possible thanks to the financial support provided by the European Commission for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection and the Governments of the Russian Federation, Sweden and the United States of America support of WHO’s surge capacity. WHO has agreements for stand-by surge support with Canadem, IMMAP, Norwegian Refugee Council and RedR Australia.

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