

ANGOLA

Cholera continues to take lives

Without making a sound, a two-year-old girl bundled in traditional coloured cloth was brought by her mother into a cholera treatment centre in Luanda. The girl's mother, 24-year-old Domingas Vertis, astutely sprayed disinfectant on the soles of her sandals, washed her hands, and stepped onto a sterilized doormat before handing her child to the attending nurse and health assistants. She had done this all before in April during the height of the year's first rainy season, when both she and her five-year-old son suffered from intensive vomiting, diarrhoea and dehydration. Suspecting cholera, which she had heard about through UNICEF-sponsored public service radio announcements, Domingas came to this special cholera treatment centre in Boavista, a slum area and suburb of Luanda, Angola's capital.

Here they had access to life-saving medicine and health care, not to mention round the clock monitoring by medical staff. Treatment of cholera patients nationwide has been a major health intervention by the Ministry of Health with support from UNICEF and WHO.

However, medical assistance is often sought too late. Without early detection and correct medication, cholera easily kills within hours from the onset of symptoms. Unlike Domingas many others will not have the resources or knowledge to seek medical attention.

Cholera can spread rapidly in overcrowded living conditions, especially those with insufficient sanitation and low access to safe drinking water or hygiene. Neuza Chipango, Head Nurse at the Boavista cholera treatment centre, is worried. "Back in April 2006, during the height of the outbreak, this clinic had five tents set up and still there was not enough room. We had to treat patients on the ground, there were just too many," she remembers. Since the end of February 2006 there have been 83,986 reported cholera cases and 3,157 deaths across all but two of Angola's 18 provinces.

The United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) has funded UNICEF and WHO to support the national cholera control measures being taken by the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Energy and Water to save lives. To date, this has included water chlorination in the most affected areas, reaching 200,000 people daily in Luanda. In other provinces, 'safe water' packages and soap for thousands of households have been donated to families. Assistance has also included training of staff in cholera diagnosis and case management and positioning of essential cholera treatment and medication. Cholera awareness messages have been produced and broadcast via television, radio stations and community channels, reaching an estimated 4.8 million people.

Still, more needs to be done. To date, less than 40 per cent of Angola's population has access to safe water. Today, Domingas Vertis says she and her son have no more symptoms of cholera. But as the four nurses and health assistants administer an intravenous drip solution for her daughter, worry returns to her face. She can only hope that she brought her to the clinic on time.