

Can Christians Stop Cholera Surge?

Haiti's first death from cholera came in early October. By Nov. 15, German news agency Spiegel Online reported 1,000 people had died of the disease. The next day, media reports announced cholera had spread to neighboring Dominican Republic. By Thanksgiving, 400 people were dying weekly and the number was rapidly growing.

"If the cholera spreads, it will become another disaster," says Bill Horan, president of Operation Blessing International (OBI). "Fear is everywhere. Cholera is perceived as a death sentence. Because of the threat, victims are not allowed to go anywhere – they can't use the transportation system and most hospitals are even afraid to treat them."

After the earthquake, OBI partnered with Water Missions International (WMI), a Christian engineering organization in Charleston, S.C., to install five water processing units at Port-au-Prince's General Hospital. Each unit is capable of producing enough pure water to replace the 15,000 gallons per day the hospital had been purchasing from delivery trucks.

In response to the cholera situation, OBI and WMI again teamed up to deliver more water purifying units to Haiti. OBI also partnered with St. Luc Hospital and St. Damien Pediatric Hospital to fund a new isolation ward for the treatment of patients with the disease.

Samaritan's Purse also responded to the outbreak by sending out a desperate plea for more medical volunteers. In October, the organization opened an oral rehydration center in Bercy, about 40 minutes north of Port-au-Prince. It also set up a clinic and 200-bed treatment center at the Nazarene Church in Cite Soleil, an impoverished and densely populated community

in the Port-au-Prince area.

Although the cholera outbreak presents new challenges and a dire need for medicine, medical help and clean water, Horan believes harvesting fish could provide a long-term solution to cholera and other waterborne diseases. Last year, OBI launched a nationwide microenterprise fish farm project to help some of Haiti's poorest families raise and sell tilapia. OBI also imported about 6,000 gambusia fish, which the organization used during Hurricane Katrina relief efforts to decontaminate mosquito-infested bodies of water.

After seeing success in New Orleans, OBI hopes bringing gambusia to Haiti can stop the spread of malaria, cholera and other diseases. The fish are being harvested and plans are underway to put them into stagnant waters, creeks, lakes and rivers. Horan is also quick to point out that the tilapia-harvesting business will bring employment and food to Haiti's hungry families.