

November 1, 2010

Between a rock and a hard place.....

Hello Friends

The cholera cases are double from one week ago, about 2300 last week to over 4600 as of yesterday.

We have seen a lot of the victims because we have gone out of our way to see try to help them, as I mentioned, by to go to Artibonite and helping there. We have made trips to about 7 places during this week- a number of times to St Marc, to Ester, to Dauphine. But one of the most desolate places we visited is Grand Saline. They are very poor and very friendly people, who seem to live at the end of the world. We could only go in by helicopter and out by boat. By boat I mean into the open sea at night in a small motored craft with no life preservers, no oars and no lights, starting off in the mouth of the filthy Artibonite river, which is full of the cholera. "Dear diary..."

The people drink water directly from the river because they have no other choice. There is no other water. Our friends from *Operation Blessing* have installed a number of generator run filters in the river so the people have a chance to drink clean water.

As I mentioned before, on our runs we bring beds, mattresses, IV fluids, water, gator aid and some food. Most people can't eat much, since cramps and vomit are such a big part of the illness, so often we mostly bring snacks.

Now there are cases of cholera nearby us, here in Port au Prince. In general those who die seem to die quickly. They have so much of the bacteria that they lose fluids through diarrhea faster than anyone could even begin to give them fluids. The majority of people ride it out with many difficulties but victoriously. We haven't seen many cases here in Port au Prince yet, but a short walk from us, at Doctors without Borders, they have seen 40 cases.

We have an organized plan to help in case of a huge outbreak of cholera in Port au Prince, in a way that will not disturb the function of, or contaminate, either our children's hospital (St Damien) or our family hospital (St Luke).

We have covered about two acres of land next to the St Luke hospital with gravel, and we set up so far 4 of a total of 15 large tents, where we will receive cholera patients. We have set up a diarrhea clinic there, where our staff will evaluate anyone with diarrhea, without them needing to go into either the St Damien or St Luke compounds. After screening, if it is likely cholera, we will bring them nearby to Doctors without Borders cholera site. When they have reached their capacity of 250 beds, we will begin receiving the patients in our tents. We have a capacity for about 300 people.

We have organized all the logistics for routing, handwashing, toilets and meals to minimize chance of spread of the disease. Our senior doctor, Manuel Castro, who is from Cuba and was pulled out of the rubble of our old hospital in Petionville, worked in Africa when a cholera outbreak brought him and his staff 6,000 patients in four days. He is generously helping and guiding us. We had airlifted him back to Cuba with crushed limbs after the January 12 earthquake, but he returned to us a few months ago now that his injuries have healed. This is more amazing since he is in his seventies. You should hear him tell the story about how God used a rocking chair to save his life when our old hospital fell on him, or the story of how Norma convinced the Cuban embassy to airlift him home to Cuba, when they didn't want to get involved. But I am straying now. Back to the point. We are nearly ready for a cholera epidemic, but let's pray it doesn't happen.

On top of this, you probably see that hurricane Tomas is heading right toward us. We will have heavy winds and rains starting Tuesday, and then will be hit full force on Friday. If you use Google and type in hurricane Tomas, at least as of tonight's forecast, you will see how the hurricane is going out of its way by turning 90 degrees north, on a dime, to head to Les Cayes and Port au Prince. I wonder, trying to look at the bright side, if it will dilute all the cholera out of the rivers and the city. But I also shudder to think what it will be like for the million people living in fragile tents, whose meager belongings will be turned into missiles travelling at 90 miles an hour. We are getting our mission ready for the hurricane, getting windows covered (hundreds of windows), and we will move the St Louis children and the St Luke patients to Francisville for protection. We are filling sandbags for the gates against flooding, and stocking up on supplies and drinking water. In this country it's hard to stick to your day job. We always have pretty dramatic side issues to deal with as well.

Please keep us in your prayers. The situations have been trying and challenging. Let's pray that Tomas blows out to sea where it can hurt no one, and that the cholera just dries up.

Then we can get back to work, trying to accompany people on a march out of poverty.

Thanks for all your messages of encouragement, and your prayers, and the donations which are very helpful.

God bless you!

Fr Rick Frechette cp