

Medical team says misuse of drugs led to cholera deaths

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LONDON, Feb 10 (AFP) - Several thousand cholera deaths in Rwandan refugee camps in eastern Zaire could have been avoided last year if the appropriate drugs had been used more quickly and correctly, an international medical team found.

Reporting in Saturday's edition of the British medical journal, *The Lancet*, the team estimated that at least 12,000 people died of cholera in July in the camps around the town of Goma across the border in Zaire.

"Yet many of these deaths were preventable," the report said, estimating that the death rate could have been cut by as much as a quarter.

The team included staff from the Bangladesh-based International Center for Diarrhoeal Diseases (ICDDR).

It found that the rehydration of cholera victims by intravenous injections had started too late, that inappropriate products were used and too little attention had been given to re-

hydrating salts taken by mouth.

Rehydration solutions intended for intravenous injections had been given orally, the report added.

"Antibiotics were also used incorrectly," the report said.

In some of the health centres in the refugee camps, doctors even prescribed two antibiotics "although the causal organism was known to be resistant to these antibiotics".

The authors of the article concluded that "workers with professional and management experience are needed and inexperienced enthusiastic workers motivated by charity are becoming less useful".

The group added that "leaders of wealthy nations tend to wait until public opinion forces them to respond to disasters."

"Unless global action is taken urgently to improve the state of emergency preparedness, there will be more public health disasters like

Goma,” the group said.

Some two million Rwandans fled, mainly to neighbouring Zaire but also to other nations of the region, after their country plunged into an ethnic bloodbath in April last year.

The Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front, which seized power in Rwanda in July, accuses former government troops of the Hutu majority and ex-

tremist militiamen of killing between 500,000 and a million Tutsis and moderate Hutus.

The bloodletting began after the death of Hutu president Juvenal Habyarimana in a suspected rocket attack on his plane as it landed at Kigali on April 6.

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