

WHO/PAHO supports health response to Hurricane Ike in Cuba

17 September 2008 | HAVANA/GENEVA -- Cuban medical facilities have been extensively damaged by extreme weather events in recent weeks, jeopardizing health care delivery in the country's west. In response, the World Health Organization (WHO) has secured US\$524 000 to re-equip health facilities and provide maternal and child health care in Pinar del Rio province and on Isla de la Juventud, off the southern coast.

Hurricane Gustav and Tropical Storm Hanna caused widespread damage in western Cuba, rendering some health facilities inoperable and severely hampering disease surveillance and control activities.

In response, WHO/PAHO has developed a US\$1.2 million project to buy and distribute medical supplies and equipment (including beds and sterilizing and operating theater equipment). So far, US\$524 000 has been provided by the United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund.

The priority for WHO/PAHO is to ensure that health care needs are met, particularly those of vulnerable groups such as pregnant women, children, the elderly and those with disabilities and injuries. The project aims to ensure access to health services for nearly 200 000 people now living in shelters and another 2 million affected in Cuba's eastern and western provinces.

"Cuban authorities must be praised for the health services they have managed to provide their people during the ongoing hurricane season, but the devastating effects of Hurricane Gustav and Tropical Storm Hanna have placed a huge burden on the country's health system," said Dr. Lea Guido, PAHO/WHO Representative in Cuba. "WHO will now support the Cuban Ministry of Public Health to re-establish health care services and provide the urgent care that its population needs."

Health infrastructure in western Cuba (Pinar del Rio and Isla de la Juventud) was severely damaged: 314 health facilities, 26 hospitals, 18 polyclinics, 191 family consultation offices, 14 homes for the elderly and 42 pharmacies, according to official sources. The tertiary care facility on Isla de la Juventud, the 396-bed capacity general hospital, 'Héroes de Baire,' delivers care to a population of 87 000, but the facility has been severely damaged and is not functional. Three primary health care clinics on the island have also been damaged, as well as the main emergency unit, the epidemiological surveillance unit, and the municipal warehouse for medical supplies.

In the province of Pinar del Rio, on the Cuban mainland, the 440-bed hospital 'Comandante Pinares' in the municipality of San Cristobal was seriously damaged. This hospital normally provides medical services to almost 200 000 people living in eastern Pinar del Rio. A health center was

also totally destroyed and a large number of family doctor facilities are non-functional, as well as pharmacies, municipal epidemiological and surveillance centers, laboratories and other primary health care facilities.

"The WHO/PAHO project aims to quickly re-equip affected health facilities, strengthen laboratories and epidemiological surveillance sites, and establish an early warning system for outbreaks of diseases such as dengue fever," said Dr Eric Laroche, Assistant Director-General for WHO's Health Action in Crises Cluster.

Rapid rehabilitation of damaged health facilities is underway and a damage assessment is being conducted in eastern Cuba, where significant health sector damage also occurred. WHO/PAHO and other agencies will make a field visit to these impacted areas. 'Hospitals Safe from Disasters' is the theme of the 2008-09 World Disaster Reduction Campaign, which is raising awareness about the need to ensure that health facilities can continue to function in emergency situations.

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