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Refugee Camps are a Breeding Ground for Disease

This is the VOA Special English Health Report.

United Nations aid agencies say hundreds of thousands of refugees are living in unacceptable conditions at camps. These people fled their homes because of violence in the Middle East and Africa. The U.N. agencies are blaming serious food and water problems at many refugee camps for the spread of life-threatening diseases.

Officials say cholera, malaria and jaundice -- combined with malnutrition -- are threatening refugees who had hoped to be safe after they entered the camps.

There are thousands of people at one camp in South Sudan. They fled there to escape the military conflict in the area. Camp officials have reported cases of hepatitis E: a viral disease spread through contaminated food and water.

U.N. refugee agency spokesman Adrian Edwards says most of those infected are young people.

ADRIAN EDWARDS: "Hepatitis E hits young people between the ages of fifteen and forty hardest. In the three camps where we see refugees with acute jaundice syndrome, more than half are between twenty and thirty-nine."

Camps in countries like South Sudan, Sierra Leone, Libya, and Nigeria have reported severe cases of cholera. Officials say keeping cholera and jaundice from spreading is very difficult. They believe the best way to deal with these infections is to prevent them.

Dr. Peter Hotez is an infectious disease expert. He says cholera often threatens people living in extreme conditions.

PETER HOTEZ: "The vibrio cholerae bacillus produces a toxin, and this toxin has the ability to poison cells in such a way that you can no longer absorb water so you can become just a shriveled, desiccated individual just a few hours after infection."

UNICEF estimates that nearly four hundred thousand African children under five will need treatment for severe malnutrition this year. These children are at greater risk of cholera and other diseases.

UNICEF-supported health clinics in many camps are providing tablets to purify water. And they are trying to teach displaced families how to stay healthy.

Dr. Hotez says cholera, for example, can be prevented with sanitary living conditions. But once diarrhea develops, he says, oral rehydration treatment may be the only way to save a child's life.

Pillar Bauza is with the UN refugee agency. She works with children in refugee camps across Africa.

PILLAR BAUZA: "We have high rates of mortality, above the emergency threshold plus high rates of malnutrition."

Refugee camps along the border between Syria and Turkey have reported cases of cholera and malaria. Experts warn that other bacterial, viral and parasitic diseases could become deadly epidemics in crowded camps. Dirty conditions are common in the camps, while safe food and drinking water are hard to find.

And that's the VOA Special English Health Report. For more health news, go to learningenglish.voanews.com. You can read and listen to stories and learn American English. I'm Milagros Ardin.

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