icddr,b team helps fight cholera outbreaks in Somali refugee camps

DHAKA—5 September, 2011— A team of experts from icddr,b’s Dhaka Hospital arrived in Northern Kenya on Monday, 5 September 2011 to assist the international community in managing the cholera outbreaks that have been reported in the Somali refugee camps that have sprung up on either side of the Somali/Kenyan border.

According to UNICEF, almost five million people in famine-stricken southern Somalia are at risk of cholera and acute watery diarrhoea due to malnutrition, lack of access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene, population movements and crowding in displaced sites.

The three-person icddr,b team, comprised of two physicians and one nurse, will initially operate along the borders of Somalia and Kenya where they will review existing control and prevention guidelines, while training health personnel and auxiliary staff from about 70 NGOs and government organisations. It is hoped that the team will fly to Mogadishu at the end of the week.

“Our team specialises in the management of cholera outbreaks and epidemiology,” said team leader, Dr. PK Bardhan. “Our priority is to train local people so that the region’s health authorities are equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to manage and curtail any serious cholera outbreaks in the region. We will also provide training on clinical case management and assist with establishing treatment centres in areas that we feel may pose as breeding grounds for cholera.”

Years of civil war have torn Somalia’s health infrastructure apart, leading to extremely poor sanitary conditions, under which the cholera bacteria can spread. Cholera can kill quickly but can be easily treated through antibiotics and the use of Oral Rehydration Solution, which icddr,b (then known as the Cholera Laboratory) helped pioneer in the early 1970’s, in the wake of the Liberation War of Bangladesh.

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Notes to editors:

1. icddr,b

icddr,b is a leading health research institution located in Dhaka. In collaboration with academic and research institutions throughout the world, icddr,b conducts research and training to develop and share knowledge which address some of the most critical health concerns facing the world today. It translates this knowledge in its Dhaka Hospital, which treats more than 130,000 patients a year. In the past decade the hospital has treated more than a million patients with diarrhoeal disease, 300,000 of whom would have died without treatment.

icddr,b discovered and developed Oral Rehydration Salts (ORS), a simple mixture of salt and sugar, the cornerstone of treatment for diarrhoeal dehydration world-wide.

2. icddr,b team

Dr Pradip Kumar Bardhan (team leader), Chief Physician, Dhaka Hospital

Dr Azharul Islam Khan, Clinical Lead and Head, Diarrhoeal Treatment Unit

Momtaz Begum, Nursing Officer, Short Stay Unit

3. Cholera

Cholera is an acute diarrhoeal infection caused by ingestion of food or water contaminated with the bacterium \textit{Vibrio cholerae}. It can kill within 24 hours if left untreated. Every year, there are an estimated 3–5 million cholera cases worldwide and 100 000–120 000 cholera-related deaths. The short incubation period of two hours to five days enhances the potentially explosive pattern of outbreaks.