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icddr,b Team Returns from Cholera-hit Somalia

A team of experts from icddr,b's Dhaka Hospital returned to Bangladesh on 21 September after spending more than 20 days managing cholera outbreaks in Northern Kenya and Somalia. The three-member team, comprised of two physicians and a nurse, left Dhaka on 1 September for the Somali refugee camps that have sprung up along the border with Kenya. On Sunday, 11 September, the team had travelled to Somalia to begin a 10-day training programme in the country's beleaguered capital, Mogadishu.

Based at the Banadir Hospital in Mogadishu, the city's largest hospital, and working under the banner of Muslim Aid, Dr Azharul Khan, Dr PK Bardhan, and nursing officer Momtaz Begum shared their expertise in the treatment of cholera and other causes of acute watery diarrhoea with local healthcare workers and local NGOs. There, they held a five-day training course for health professionals, including nurses and community health workers at the hospital which is receiving a huge number of patients with cholera and other causes of Acute Watery Diorrohea on a daily basis. Together with malnutrition and malaria, acute watery diarrhoea (AWD) has become a major health threat in the famine-stricken country with, according to Dr Khan, "huge numbers of AWD patients" seeking medical assistance daily.

The team also visited the offices of various relief organisations such as Islamic Aid, UNICEF, and Muslim Relief, where they shared their experiences with staff and discussed opportunities for collaboration in the future. The team capped off their visit to the region by visiting a camp for internally displaced people. Here, malnutrition and poor hygiene are rampant and exchange of best practices with camp leaders and volunteer health workers make a big difference

On Tuesday, 20 September, the team returned to Nairobi for debriefing sessions with partner NGOs. That same day in New York, icddrb launched a new initiative to improve its emergency response capabilities. It announced the initiative at the annual Clinton Global Initiative (CGI), which aims to connect and empower leaders to create solutions to the world's most pressing global challenges. This was the first year in which icddr,b was represented.

It may be mentioned that the team had originally left for North Kenya on September to assist the international community in tackling cholera outbreak in neighbouring Somalia. Working with WHO and Unicef, their goal is to review the existing control and prevention guidelines, and provide training to health personnel and auxiliary staff from about 70 NGOs and government organisations.

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

Years of civil war have torn Somalia's health infrastructure apart, leading to extremely poor sanitary conditions in which the cholera bacteria can spread.

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