# Anger and angst in Haiti as cholera victims wait for UN compensation

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http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/haiti/article163840063.html

In a suburb a few miles south of Haiti’s capital of Port-au-Prince, Vilner Benjamin walks through a concrete maze of unpainted cinder block homes and narrow alleys pointing out the filthy, standing water and the canal that floods with disease-carrying waste whenever it rains.

His cell phone rings nonstop as he makes his way through the neighborhood called Bergamoth, with caller after caller anxiously asking the same question: “Any news?”

The calls are from Haitian cholera victims who are desperate to know if they’ll receive any of the compensation promised by the United Nations after its blue-helmeted peacekeepers infected Haiti’s Artibonite River and one of its tributaries with the deadly disease in 2010.

“They are thirsty for information,” says Benjamin, head of ASOVIK’K, the Association of Cholera Victims of Carrefour, which is compiling a list of cholera victims — about 2,700 and growing — in anticipation of U.N. payment.

A treatable but potentially fatal bacterial infection, cholera causes severe diarrhea and vomiting that can lead to dehydration and death in a matter of hours. **Unknown in Haiti for at least a century**, cholera has [afflicted more than 812,000 Haitians](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/hti_cholera_figures_may_2017_en.pdf), fatally infecting over 9,600 since it was introduced by Nepalese peacekeepers 10 months **after the country’s Haiti’s** devastating [2010 earthquake](http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/haiti/article136304303.html).

Francette Exantus, 44, is still feeling its debilitating effects — even walking a few steps is exhausting, she said — and has yet to see any compensation.

“I am a multiple cholera victim,” said Exantus, a widowed mother of five who lives in Cité Soleil, a teeming seaside slum with tens of thousands of cholera victims. She said she lost her street-vending business after contracting the waterborne disease in 2010, and her father-in-law and husband died after they drank water contaminated with the cholera bacteria.

“My husband had no one to take care of him, only me, because everyone was afraid of the sickness,” Exantus said, following a protest by cholera victims last month on the final day of a [visit](http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/haiti/article158056724.html)to Haiti by the U.N. Security Council. “In Haiti, once someone is afraid of an illness, no one can save you. The only thing left is for you to die.”

The United Nations, which after years of denial finally acknowledged its role in the outbreak in August,has pledged $400 million to treat cholera victims and improve sanitation and water infrastructure in Haiti, while also providing “material assistance and support” to those most severely affected. But it’s unclear how long Haitians will have to wait, and if compensation is offered,what it might involve.

A suggestion last month by [U.N. Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed](http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/haiti/article156234964.html) that $200 million of the money would be used to build “community projects” has been met with anger and angst in Haiti. Victims and their advocates view it as a betrayal of the promise made by former U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon who, after offering [a long-sought after apology](http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/haiti/article118343348.html)in December for the U.N.’s role, promised the victims would be consulted on any compensation decisions.

Stéphane Dujarric, spokesman for current U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres, offered little clarity on the issue when he was asked about individual payments earlier this month at U.N. headquarters: “I think we will take one step at a time.”

Brian Concannon Jr., executive director of the Boston-based Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti (IJDH), said despite Ban’s promise, “the U.N. has not consulted a single cholera victim about the response, while it is making important decisions.”

“Moving forward with only community projects without consulting Haitians will not be accepted in Haiti and will not effectively address the harms that have been suffered by victims,” he said.

Concannon’s advocacy group, which works with thousands of Haitian cholera victims through the Bureau des Avocats Internationaux (BAI), a Port-au-Prince based human rights legal firm, has pushed for individualized payments. A lawsuit it filed in the Southern District of New York in October 2013 on behalf of 5,000 cholera victims was dismissed two years ago by a U.S. judge.

Another lawsuit, this one on behalf of 3,000 victims and their families, remains on the dockets of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of New York.

“As long as their responsibility to compensate is voluntary, the U.N. will continue to do what it has done, which is change the rules, cry poverty and claim they have no funds,” said James Haggerty, the lead attorney in the suit, who is asking for it to proceed as a personal injury case and as a class action on behalf of all Haitian cholera sufferers.

While the UN has had problems raising money for the trust fund with even the United States refusing to pay, Haggerty said “the notion that the United Nations is a poor organization shouldn’t factor into whether the people of Haiti get justice.

“If this had happened on the streets of Manhattan, Paris or Brussels, the money would be found,” he said.

The suit doesn’t specify the amount of damages requested from the U.N. But victims in Haiti — citing lost wages and ongoing chronic illnesses — say they want$50,000 per surviving cholera victim and $100,000 per death.

“This sickness leaves everyone it touches with problems,” said Christophe Aphaon, 57, who says he has ailments including vision problems, chronic pain and headaches. “I want to know what the United Nations is going to do with us, what is it going to do for us ...because we have suffered a lot.”

Aphaon was among hundreds of victims who greeted the security council delegation last month with protests.

“I’m a victim. My mother is a victim. My child is a victim,” Litelaire Louis, 37, said standing on a sidewalk near the presidential palace, yards from where diplomats were lunching with Haitian business leaders.

Pointing to his 6-year-old son, he said, “I need to be able to do something for him, to say ‘Here is what you’ve received as compensation as a result of the illness you contracted at the hands of the U.N.’ ”

[Dr. Renaud Piarroux](http://www.mercedsunstar.com/news/local/article3276469.html), a French infections disease specialist who has studied cholera in Haiti since its arrival and argues it canbe eradicated, said there hasn’t been enough research to determine if the disease causes chronic health issues.

“This does not mean that patient complaints are unfounded. Simply put, no one has thought this problems was worth considering,” said Piarroux.

Just off the main road inside Haiti’s largest slum, where children play near overflowing canals and open sewage trenches, hundreds of cholera victims cram inside a school with dirt floors, concrete block walls and crumbling wooden benches. They meet here every Saturday, at 3 p.m., to lend support and to get updates about the U.N.

Like a Baptist preacher leading a congregation in sermon, Berthony Clermont, the head of the Cité Soleil cholera victims group, asks the crowd, ‘What kind of damages do you want?”

“Individual,” they yell in unison.

“If the United Nations thinks it’s going to do collective damages, it’s going to be catastrophic,” he said in an interview. “The people will not agree. There will be disorder, chaos, even deaths. People will take to the streets.”

Clermont said the amount victims are asking for is not excessive.

“In Haiti you have a population that isn’t working and these people certainly can’t work after cholera finished them off,” he said. “Giving them a public park, won’t benefit them. Build a hospital? The country already has hospitals. Build a school — will that benefit them? What they had financially when they contracted cholera is gone. Now what they need is liquid, individual payments.”

Benjamin, 54, who contracted cholera in 2013, said he’s heard the UN wants to provide potable water and health centers, and funnel the money through the Haitian government.

“If that’s the route they are going to take, then consider it a lost cause,” he said.

Victims, he said, “don’t trust the government... When you consider the amount of aid Haiti received to reconstruct the country after the earthquake, the government didn’t do anything. The people are still living in the same misery they were before the earthquake.”