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As Obama Urges Emergency Action on Zimbabwe, Health Crisis Worsens

(Cambridge, Mass.) February 2, 2009 -When Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) released its emergency report on Jan. 13 detailing the country's health system collapse the reported cholera death toll soared past 2,000. The number currently exceeds 3,000, according the World Health Organization.

The Obama administration faces an unprecedented challenge in making Zimbabwe a top priority in its Africa foreign policy, so PHR is calling for radical new solutions.

"Global leadership is required to address the collapse of a health system in a country that once was a breadbasket for Africa and boasted one of the best health systems on the continent," said PHR CEO Frank Donaghue. "The world has never seen a country's health system fall so far, so fast."

The rapidly climbing cholera death toll is but one symptom of the health system's collapse.

- The average life expectancy in Zimbabwe has plummeted from 62 in the early 1990s to 36 today. The average life expectancy for females in Zimbabwe (34) is the lowest on the planet.
- Every day, 400 Zimbabweans die of AIDS.
- PHR reports that many people living with HIV have experienced interruptions of their anti-retroviral drug supplies. Further, many have been forced to change their drug regimes, risking the development of new and drug-resistant strains of HIV.
- PHR also reported cases that raise concerns about the development and spread of multi-drug resistant strains of TB (MDR-TB) and the potential for extensively drug resistant TB (XDR-TB) due to Zimbabwe's failing TB treatment and control programs.

“Multi-drug resistant strains of HIV and TB don’t carry passports or stop at the borders,” said Dr. Chris Beyrer, one of the report’s authors and a professor at Johns Hopkins School of Public Health. “The epidemics of HIV/AIDS, cholera and TB currently raging in Zimbabwe pose threats to international peace and security in the region and beyond.”

PHR is calling on the Obama administration to follow through on pledges made to bolster US leadership in the UN and engage in preventive diplomacy to strengthen respect for human rights.

Donaghue stated, “The Obama administration should consult on an urgent basis with other Security Council members to assess options for UN action to address the crisis. This includes PHR’s recommendation that the Security Council appoint an independent entity to take over Zimbabwe’s sanitation, water, and health care delivery systems.”

To download PHR’s Health in Ruins: A Man-Made Disaster in Zimbabwe (PDF)
Full report: <http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/library/report-2009-01-13.html>

Summary:

<http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/library/documents/reports/2009-zimbabwe-health-report-summary.pdf>

PHR released a short online video entitled ‘La Fleuve du Mal’ which is available at YouTube.com

www.youtube.com/watch?v=iaXowzh-XCM

PHR’s photographs are also available on Flickr at

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/physiciansforhumanrights/sets/72157612319502589/>

Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) mobilizes the health professions to advance the health and dignity of all people by protecting human rights. In a report, Broken Laws, Broken Lives: Medical Evidence of US Torture and Its Impact, released in June 2008, PHR documented the severe physical and psychological pain and long-term disability that has resulted from abusive and unlawful US interrogation practices in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Guantánamo Bay. The use of the word genocide with regard to the atrocities committed in Darfur was first used by PHR in a report released in 2006. PHR shared the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize.