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TAC Demands an End to the Regional Crisis Created by Zimbabwe's Collapsed Health System

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Daily we hear about the horrific conditions in Zimbabwe. In the past three weeks, the complete collapse of public health system and sanitation infrastructure has developed into a major cholera epidemic, which has not only extended to the entire country but also into South Africa. Authorities have closed the country's two main hospitals in Harare, including maternity wards. Essential medicines are not available to treat diseases that the government's gross negligence has exacerbated. Antiretroviral therapy for HIV/AIDS patients and TB treatment has been severely disrupted. Recently, the Medical School of the University of Zimbabwe was closed indefinitely as it has become impossible to continue to teach medical students in non-functioning health institutions. In the same week, Zimbabwean health workers organised a mass protest in Harare over the failure of the government to address both the health system collapse and the cholera outbreak. The country's notorious riot police brutally and violently broke up the peaceful demonstration that was calling for a regional and international crisis response.

According to the Zimbabwean Association for Doctors for Human Rights, there is need for urgent action to rescue the public health system as "the system has been paralysed by drug shortages, insufficient medical supplies, dilapidated infrastructure, equipment breakdowns, and brain drain." Apart from the closure of the main referrals hospitals, most district and municipal clinics are barely functioning.

The current cash crisis violates the right to health and particularly access to treatment for people living with HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe. The majority of the population cannot afford private health care services that have to be paid for in foreign currency-the Rand or US dollar- which means that the poor are dying because of their inability to access medical services. Yet even the few who are still able to purchase medication have been faced with the inordinate challenge of accessing their monies from the banks, owing to the cash limits that have been instituted by the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe. The requirement that people who need to withdraw more of their money than the prescribed cash limits must present prescriptions or invoices without the safeguard of confidentiality violates the right to privacy of people living with HIV.

Last week Harare did not have running water as the municipal authorities do not have the chemicals to purify and pump water in most urban areas; this worsens the spread of cholera caused by contaminated water. All over the country's urban centre, there are reports of raw sewage running down streets because of poor or non-existent maintenance regimes. Residents have resorted to digging shallow wells to access household and drinking water. The cholera outbreak is causing hundreds of preventable deaths estimated to be close to 1,000 people with an infection rate far in excess of 12,000.

The economic and political crisis has greater implications than sending thousands of refugees to Zimbabwe's neighbours. Zimbabwe's cholera epidemic has now become a regional crisis. The Southern African Development Community and the African Union and Zimbabwean leadership has failed to either resolve the political and humanitarian crisis, or defend the rights of the people of Zimbabwe from an illegitimate regime. The message this conveys is that the lives of Zimbabweans have become worthless.

TAC's work is to struggle for social justice, democracy, and right to health care, and we call for the following actions

to be taken:

- The Zimbabwean government should immediately work with the international community to bring the cholera outbreak under control and restore supply of safe water and sanitation systems to Zimbabwe.
- Steps must be taken to provide drugs, adequate medical supplies and equipment so that the health system can immediately respond to this public health crisis. Urgent assistance is needed to restore the Zimbabwe health system to a functional state.
- The government must guarantee an environment that allows healthcare workers to work professionally, and put into place measures that will retain healthcare workers by providing adequate remuneration, incentives, and safe working conditions.
- We pledge solidarity with the people of Zimbabwe and demand that a legitimate government that respects the rights of all the people of Zimbabwe be formed immediately.

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