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Civil Society Groups Appeal to UN Secretary-General for Response to Haiti Cholera Claims

November marks one year since filing of claims without substantive response from UN

November 29, 2012, NEW YORK — Forty-eight prominent human rights groups from civil society and academia appealed to United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon to demonstrate UN leadership in human rights by responding to claims of victims of the raging cholera epidemic that UN troops brought to Haiti two years ago.

This month marks one year since over 5,000 victims of cholera filed claims with the UN seeking justice for their injuries. The claims seek a) provision of the water and sanitation infrastructure necessary to control the cholera epidemic, b) compensation and c) a public apology. In its acknowledgement of receipt of the victims' claims in December 2011, the UN promised a response "in due course," but has since not responded to the victims or publicly disclosed any information about its legal process beyond that it is "studying the claims."

“The UN should evidence its commitment to human rights and international law by responding to the grave cholera epidemic in Haiti and providing victims with access to justice and reparations,” said Kim Irish, President of Human Rights Advocates, an ECOSOC-accredited organization that participates actively in the work of various United Nations human rights bodies.

Cholera was introduced to Haiti in October 2010 as a result of poor UN sanitation practices that allowed untreated human waste from soldiers deployed from a cholera-endemic country to leak into Haiti’s central river system. Genetic testing of the strain in Haiti has determined it to be a “perfect match” to the strain active in the troop-contributing country from which the peacekeepers were deployed without being tested or treated for cholera. In March 2012, the UN Special Envoy to Haiti, former U.S. president Bill Clinton, confirmed that UN peacekeepers were the “proximate cause” of the cholera outbreak.

In the letter to the Secretary-General, the groups write: “As organizations that work toward the realization of human rights and access to justice around the world, we appreciate the singular role of the UN in spearheading progress in the development and implementation of human rights law. Continued UN silence and denial would be a grave setback to the progress of recent decades and would irrevocably damage the UN’s moral force as a steward of justice and human rights.”

The epidemic has killed over 7600 Haitians and sickened over 600,000. The International Organization of Migration reported 4,000 new cases since Hurricane Sandy passed Haiti in October, dumping rain that caused massive flooding.

“Numerous bodies within the United Nations, including the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council, have recognized that water and sanitation are basic human rights,” said Margaret Satterthwaite, director of the Global Justice Clinic at NYU School of Law. “This is a crucial test case to determine the real meaning of those rights.”

“The U.N. simply must meet its obligations under international law. The Haitian people have a human right to a remedy and reparations,” stressed Vince Warren, Executive Director of the Center for Constitutional Rights, a U.S.-based organization dedicated to advancing and protecting the rights guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as the U.S. Constitution.