

## BEYOND OUR BORDERS

The 'Beyond our Borders' column focuses on selected and current international diseases that may affect South Africans travelling abroad. Numbers correspond to Figure 6 on page 13

### Pneumonia: Afghanistan, Balkh

In December 2020 more than 20 children died in Balkh province of Afghanistan due to pneumonia. A rise in cases is usually seen in the winter months due to extremely cold weather in the region. This year however, trends have shown a notable rise in incidence with a reported 20% increase in pneumonia cases in December 2020. This accounted for 326 child pneumonia associated admissions (out of a total of 1 679 child admissions). The aetiology of the cases and clusters of the outbreak have not yet been identified/reported.

Following years of war and political turbulence, economical strife is at a high in Afghanistan. The Save the Children organisation estimates that over 300 000 children would face the extreme weather conditions of the winter months without adequate clothing, housing or heating equipment resulting in more disease and probable death. The organisations director released a statement saying that, "schools are closed until March 2021 (due to COVID-19)... this is a serious blow because often

the classroom is the only source of warmth for children during winter when temperatures can plummet to below 27 degrees Celsius in parts of the country."

It is anticipated that temperatures will continue to drop until March. A 5-day vaccination campaign has been launched by the Afghan government and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). This campaign program is expected to cover the vaccination of 10 million children under the age of 5 across the country.

Although news reports have not specified the exact vaccine(s) that will be rolled out, the Afghanistan Ministry of Public Health said that the insecurity in different parts of the country is, and will be, the main barrier in reaching most children. Reports from BBC news however positively report that Taliban deputy leader, Mullah Baradar, announced support of the vaccine efforts following meetings with UNICEF and World Health Organization.

### Cholera, Diarrhoea & Dysentery: Yemen

Yemen is fighting a new cholera outbreak in the south-eastern province of Hadramout. Health officials attribute the regular resurgence of cholera to the crumbling sewage and drinking water systems, which have been devastated by flash floods and heavy rains. This destruction of water pipelines has resulted in houses discharging sewage in the open or small holes close by. The outbreak is also exacerbated by seasonal gathering of people during harvest of date palm trees.

In the Hajjar district, outbreaks are commonly seen in the months between April and September with cases ceasing in the following months. For the first time in decades however, 2020 saw the main district hospital reporting the arrival of new cases of cholera from October through to December. UNICEF, the World Health Organization and Yemen health authorities joined efforts to carry out a vaccination campaign in Hajjar from 20 - 25

December 2020, targeting 40 000 people in the district's rural and urban regions. Additional public health efforts included the distribution of information posters and leaflets and broadcast campaigns from roaming trucks which spoke of the campaign's significance. These awareness activities took place both before and during the campaign and were seen to have yielded success as most residents took the vaccine with little objection.

It is agreed that long term interventions are required to prevent regular resurgence. This would require rebuilding of water and sanitation systems. In the interim, floods often isolate villages due to their rough geography, making it difficult to access health care. Suggestions from local health authorities to remedy this include building several health centres in remote villages, equipping them with staff, and also creating rehydration corners for dealing with mild cases of cholera.

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## Legionellosis – United States of America, Oregon

Initial reports on 6 January 2021 identified a local outbreak of legionnaires' disease at a North Portland, Oregon, apartment building. This infection was sourced to a common water supply and since then all the residents in the building were temporarily moved from their homes until the buildings water system and plumbing could be fully assessed, cleaned and determined to be safe.

On 5 January there were four hospitalised cases reported and one reported death all from the same apartment building.

However as of 7 January a further four people from nearby buildings were presumed to have the illness based on symptomatology.

County health department officials are advising increased awareness and vigilance of symptoms of the illness as investigations continue.



**Figure 6.** Current outbreaks/events that may have implications for travellers. Numbers correspond to text above. The red dot is the approximate location of the outbreak or event.

Source: Promed ([www.promed.org](http://www.promed.org)), World Health Organization ([www.who.int](http://www.who.int))