

MIDDLE EAST - West Bank Medical Emergency

Date: March 21 - April 3, 1983 (FY 83)

Location: Cities and towns throughout the West Bank, principally Arrabah, Jenin, Yattah, Tulkarm and surrounding villages

No. Dead: None

No. Cases: 943 reported

The Disaster

From March 21 to April 3, 1983, 943 cases of acute illness characterized by headache, dizziness, photophobia, blurred vision, abdominal pain, myalgia, weakness, difficulty in breathing, fainting, midriasis, and peripheral cyanosis occurred in residents of communities throughout the West Bank. Six hundred sixty of the patients (70%) were adolescent school girls. Many patients were hospitalized. None died.

Action Taken by the Government of Israel (GOI)

A comprehensive investigation of the outbreak of illness on the West Bank was undertaken by the Israeli Ministry of Health (IMOH). Both the IMOH Department of Epidemiology and the IMOH Environmental Health Administration carried out extensive analyses in an attempt to identify the nature and cause of the illness. The Environmental Health Administration performed environmental toxicology analyses of suspect objects, specifically to determine the possible presence of a toxic gas. The Department of Epidemiology collected extensive data from the victims. A number of other medical groups, both Israeli and Palestinian, took part in the investigation. These included the Director of Public Health, Civil Administration of the West Bank; Jordan Medical Association; Mukassad Hospital in Jerusalem; West Bank Pharmacists' Association; Hadassah School of Public Health and Community Medicine (The Hebrew University); and Bir Zeit University.

On March 31, the IMOH officially requested the United States to send a team of American doctors to the West Bank to aid in identifying the nature of the outbreak.

Assistance Provided by the United States Government (USG)

On April 1, the Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East and South Asia, Nicholas A. Veliotos, formally requested funding from the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) to send a team of doctors from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta to the West Bank. The assignment of the team was to conduct an epidemiological survey of the unexplained medical phenomenon afflicting hundreds of school children throughout the West Bank. OFDA authorized \$9,500 for the purpose of sending two CDC physicians, one from the Division of Surveillance, Hazard Evaluations, and Field Studies, and one from the Division of Viral Diseases, to undertake the survey.

The two physicians arrived in Tel Aviv on April 3 to begin a two-week investigation which consisted of extensive clinical, epidemiological, and environmental studies throughout the affected areas of the West Bank. The final report of the CDC team concluded the following: the initial outbreak appeared to have been triggered either by psychological factors or possibly by the smell of hydrogen sulfide gas escaping from an outdoor latrine; the subsequent spread of the outbreak was due to psychogenic factors; and the termination of the outbreak was probably related to the closing of West Bank schools, which dispersed the students and helped to minimize the opportunity for the spread of symptoms.

TOTAL \$9,500

Assistance Provided by U.S. Voluntary Agencies

None reported.

Assistance Provided by the International Community

International Organizations

International Committee of the Red Cross - sent a physician to carry out an investigation of the outbreak.

World Health Organization - sent a medical team to the West Bank area to conduct an independent investigation of the outbreak.