



Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance

DISASTER CASE REPORT

Agency for
International
Development

Washington D.C.
20523

MAURITANIA - Rabies/Meningitis Epidemics

Data

Date: February-June, 1982 (FY 82)

Location: Rabies - Guidimaka region of south-central Mauritania, near the villages of Saboussire and Khabou and within 10 km of the borders with Senegal and Mali

Meningitis - Guidimaka, East and West HODH, and Trarza regions

No. Dead: Rabies - 32 animals

Meningitis - 5 children

No. Affected: Rabies - 234 animals

Meningitis - the affected regions had an estimated population of 363,000; 12 cases were reported.

Damage: Rabies - Approximately 3,255 goats, sheep, cattle, donkeys, camels, and horses were threatened by the presence of rabies, and 32 animals died from the disease. An unspecified number of animals displaying symptoms were destroyed.

The Disaster

An outbreak of animal rabies and an epidemic of meningitis created an emergency situation in Mauritania in the spring and summer of 1982. In early February, herdsman in the Guidimaka region of south-central Mauritania reported that an unknown illness was affecting their livestock. Initially, botulism was suspected. Field investigations were conducted by Mauritanian officials and an American veterinarian assigned to a USAID rural development program in the Guidimaka region. Laboratory tests of infected tissue samples confirmed the existence of rabies. A total of 32 animals, mainly cattle, died from the disease. A quarantine program and other disease control measures initiated in March prevented further livestock deaths. However, a secondary problem resulted

MAURITANIA - Rabies/Meningitis Epidemics

from the quarantine. Because the herds were restricted to a limited grazing area, which was further reduced by seasonal brush fires, there was insufficient natural forage to support the animals. With no reserve stocks which could be diverted for emergency animal feeding, there arose the possibility that more cattle might succumb to starvation than had been directly affected by the disease.

A second epidemic hit Mauritania in late March and early April. Outbreaks of meningococcal meningitis (serotype A) were reported initially in Guidimaka and later in East and West HODH and the Trarza region. A dozen cases and five deaths were reported before health officials were able to make a correct diagnosis and begin treatment. Because only a few isolated cases of meningitis have occurred in Mauritania in the past decade, the country has historically been free from the epidemics that regularly affect its neighbors in the Sahelian meningitis belt. Therefore, immunization against the disease has not been part of the national vaccination program, and an outbreak of epidemic proportions was entirely unexpected.

Action Taken by the Government of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania (GIRM)

The GIRM immediately instituted a series of epidemic control measures in response to the animal rabies threat after positive findings of the disease were confirmed on March 2. A quarantine was imposed in the affected areas, a zone with a 5 km radius encompassing three nomadic campsites. The movement of animals into or out of the quarantine area was prohibited. During the first three months of the quarantine period, all stray dogs, cats, and other carnivores found within the quarantine area were destroyed through systematic hunting and poisoning. Both domestic and wild animals were observed for three months following the last confirmed case of the disease.

The GIRM was concerned about the possible transmission of the disease to the human population of the area through contact with the saliva of diseased animals. As a precautionary measure, the GIRM began a program to vaccinate people who may have handled diseased animals. Approximately 100 persons, including nomadic herders within the quarantine area and sedentary villagers involved in hand butchering of animals, were vaccinated against rabies. Measures taken to contain the spread of rabies were, on the whole, effective. However, fearing even greater losses of cattle due to starvation as a result of the quarantine, the GIRM appealed to the USG for emergency assistance in the form of animal feed for the quarantined herds.

The GIRM also acted quickly to provide treatment for confirmed cases of meningitis. A rabies/meningitis emergency vaccination campaign was carried out by the Mauritanian Ministry of Health (MOH) within the framework of an Expanded Program of Immunization (EPI). Mobile teams, equipped with drugs and vaccines, covered five administrative regions, treating the exposed population.

MAURITANIA - Rabies/Meningitis Epidemics

Because of the severe strain placed on the limited MOH budget by these unexpected epidemics, the GIRM made a request for donor assistance in meeting the costs of drugs, vaccines, and campaign activities.

Assistance Provided by the United States Government (USG)

In response to the GIRM's request for aid in providing animal feed, the U.S. Charge d'Affairs, Stanley N. Schrager, determined on April 6 that a disaster warranting USG assistance existed. He exercised his disaster relief authority and obligated \$25,000 for the purchase of animal feed and necessary logistical support for distribution operations. Sixty tons of pelletized animal feed of high nutritional quality and approximately 975 gallons of fuel were provided, the latter to be used by regional and national Directorate of Livestock personnel in supervising the quarantine zone and distributing relief supplies.

The arrival of the animal feed in April guaranteed the survival of the herd and the continuity of the food supply and economic livelihood of the three nomadic groups in the area.

In view of the Health Ministry's limited budget, the unexpectedness and severity of the epidemics, and the determination of the GIRM to develop long-term control measures, the Charge made a second official disaster declaration on May 18. The Mission expected to use \$20,000 in disaster funds, as the GIRM had requested, for the local purchase of medical supplies and vaccines. However, the MOH received a donation from another source, making the USG procurement unnecessary.

TOTAL \$25,000

Assistance Provided by U.S. Voluntary Agencies

None reported.

Assistance Provided by the International Community

World Health Organization (WHO) - provided emergency funds for medical supplies, value not reported.