1 October 2025

World Health Organization
South Sudan

VOICES from the field

Issue #13

Smart Logistics at the Core of WHO's Cholera Response in South Sudan

Cholera treatment center established by WHO in Tharkueng

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Juba, 29 September 2025 – For almost a year, South Sudan has been fighting one of its most persistent cholera outbreaks in recent memory. The World Health Organization (WHO), working hand in hand with the Ministry of Health (MoH) and local partners, has placed smart logistics at the very heart of the response—proving that without a strong backbone of supplies, infrastructure, and coordination, even the best health strategies cannot succeed.

The first cholera case of Western Bahr el Ghazal State was declared on 12 February 2025 in Jur River county. In many areas, fragile health systems were quickly stretched beyond capacity. By late September 2025, cholera had spread across two of the three counties of the state, with close to 2,400 cumulative cases reported. ***"Outbreaks like cholera spread fast, and our response must be faster,"*** said Dr. Humphrey Karamagi, WHO Representative in South Sudan. ***"Logistics is the backbone of outbreak response. It makes sure the right resources are in the right hands, fast, so that lives can be saved and the disease doesn't spread further."***

From trees to treatment centers

When the outbreak first appeared in Jur River County in February 2025, conditions were stark. Patients—children, women, and men—were being treated under trees, often lying on bare ground. There were no proper cholera beds, no separation between clean and contaminated zones, and waste disposal was poorly managed. Cross-contamination risks were high, and both patients and health workers were at risk of infection.

"Before the intervention, patients were treated in the open without even basic equipment," recalled Dr. Christopher Paul Madut, DG/state MoH. ***"Our partnership with WHO allowed us to quickly establish standard treatment facilities that protect both patients and healthcare workers."***

Within the first three months, WHO's logistics team supported the setup of multiple Cholera Treatment Centres (CTCs) and Oral Rehydration Points (ORPs) across affected states. These facilities provided oral and intravenous rehydration as well as antibiotics for severe cases—dramatically easing the burden on overstretched hospitals.

Rapid response in Tharkueng

When suspected cases were reported in Tharkueng earlier this year, WHO's Operations Support and Logistics (OSL) team conducted a rapid assessment to determine the fastest and most cost-effective way to establish a treatment center. Instead of using prefabricated kits, WHO partnered with a local contractor, sourcing bamboo mats, wood poles, and other materials from the community. This approach not only saved time but also boosted the local economy.

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Within just 10 working days, a 30-bed CTC was built, complete with:

30 cholera beds with accompanying supplies

Handwashing stations in every zone for infection prevention

Dedicated WASH and IPC areas, including chlorine preparation and waste management sites

Solar-powered electricity to keep the center running 24/7

10,000-litre water supply system to guarantee clean water for patients and staff

"The speed of this intervention was extraordinary," said Laurent Hieu Phung-Bothorel, WHO Operations Support and Logistics Officer. ***"By combining technical expertise with local knowledge and resources, we were able to deliver a safe, functional treatment facility in record time to treat patients promptly with ensuring full WHO's Infection PC compliances to protect patients, first line health workers, and community."***

A lifeline for communities

When cholera struck Tharkueng, families watched loved ones fall ill within hours, and too often, help arrived too late. But for many, a new Cholera Treatment Center, supported by WHO, became the difference between life and death.

For Aweng Thiep Thiep, a 38-year-old mother of eight, the center was her only hope. ***"I saw people in my village suffer terribly from cholera—some even died before help could reach them,"*** she recalls. ***"That's when I knew I had to seek treatment. I came to the Cholera Treatment Center in Tharkueng, and I truly believe it saved my life."***

Aweng is grateful not only for the facility but also for the people behind it.

"Those who built this center have rescued my life and the lives of many others from different communities. I am deeply thankful to the World Health Organization for establishing and equipping it with medicine and supplies. And I especially thank the health workers—their dedication and care have made a huge difference. They are heroes to us."

Her husband, Ayok Madut Chol, shares the same relief. ***"When cholera hit our village, we were terrified,"*** he says. ***"We saw how fast it spread and how deadly it could be. Without the support from WHO, many more people could have died."***

The treatment center now stands as a lifeline, giving families like Aweng and Ayok's hope, health, and strength to carry on.

This treatment center has become a lifeline for both the community and responders as Health workers, too, report improved safety and working conditions. ***"I thank WHO for standing with us and urge them to continue supporting other vulnerable areas. Their work is saving lives every day. It is no longer dangerous for us to treat patients,"*** said Mr. Benjamin Bol Utruet, a nurse at the Tharkueng CTC. ***"We now have protective equipment, waste disposal, and safe working spaces. We can focus on saving lives without fear of getting infected ourselves."***

The new facilities are designed for multi-purpose use. Once the cholera outbreak subsides, the centers can be adapted to manage other emergencies, from measles outbreaks to Ebola, COVID-19 or future floods-related diseases.

Looking ahead

As cholera continues to challenge South Sudan, WHO's integrated logistics approach—combining procurement, transport, infrastructure, and infection control—remains central to the response. It is a model that not only addresses the immediate outbreak but also leaves behind stronger health systems and safer communities. Overall, this outbreak turned out to be a reminder that logistics is not just about moving boxes or building structures and more about delivering dignity, safety, and hope to communities when and where most needed.

Pictorial

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