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Note for the Media WHO/26
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CHEMICAL DUMP IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE WHO PROVIDING PUBLIC HEALTH SUPPORT

Geneva/Abidjan - A World Health Organization international team is in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, to support the Ministry of Health in dealing with an environmental health emergency caused by toxic chemical waste. A clinical toxicologist arrived last week to make an initial evaluation of the situation, particularly with respect to the severity and extent of ill health caused by the chemicals. There is now an environmental health specialist and an emergency operations manager in the field and a further technical specialist will join the team. This team is being supported by additional chemical, food safety, water and sanitation, and crisis management specialists at WHO HQ and the WHO Regional Office for Africa.

The WHO team is assisting the WHO country office in several tasks, including:

- Coordinating response to the public health consequences of the crisis
- Carrying out an initial risk assessment and proposing measures to prevent further exposure of the population to the chemicals, and working with partners to accelerate the removal of the waste
- Working on clear messages for the general public on prevention of exposure
- Advising on the organization of medical care, including developing a clinical management protocol, and initiating basic epidemiological surveillance
- Helping identify and deliver much-needed supplies for the healthcare system.

WHO has sent personal protection equipment and toxicological information. In addition WHO is collaborating with other UN agencies and international teams in Abidjan that are dealing with this emergency.

WHO is in regular contact with hospitals and health centres to evaluate the burden being placed upon the health care system by this emergency. The large number of medical consultations connected with the chemical waste has resulted in a doubling of the usual workload and almost all of the personnel of the hospitals and clinics have been diverted to receive these patients, such that regular consultations have all-but-ceased. This is hampering people's access to primary and emergency health care.

To date the symptoms reported have included nosebleeds, nausea and vomiting, headaches, skin and eye irritation and respiratory symptoms. According to physicians on duty during the first days after the waste was dumped, the most severely affected patients presented with respiratory distress,

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dehydration and intestinal bleeding. The symptoms reported are consistent with exposure to the chemicals known to be in the waste.

Many people are also seeking medical advice because they are anxious about the potential long-term consequences on their health and on that of their children.

The treatment being provided is symptomatic and supportive. Due to the massive influx of people consulting medical facilities, the existing stocks of medicines and diagnostic materials have been exhausted. WHO has been able to replenish some stocks, however, more funds are needed to purchase additional drugs.

This incident has overwhelmed the health system of Côte d'Ivoire and has shown that the country does not have the capacity to deal with such an emergency.

While over 44,000 people have sought medical care, and 7 deaths have been reported, WHO is not yet able to provide an accurate assessment of the number of people who have been made ill by exposure to the waste. One of WHO's priorities is to put in place an epidemiological surveillance system to track any uncommon health events. WHO has provided computers and other equipment to assist in the computerization and subsequent analysis of thousands of case reports.

Background:

During the night of 19 August, a ship unloaded around 500 tonnes of petrochemical waste into a number of trucks that then dumped the waste in at least 15 sites around the city of Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire (population - 5 million). This waste contained a mixture of petroleum distillates, hydrogen sulphide, mercaptans, phenolic compounds and sodium hydroxide. A few days later, thousands of people started complaining of ill health and seeking medical help. Clean-up of the waste has now started but it is anticipated that this will take about six weeks.

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