Congress Faults Obama for Not Being Tough with UN Over Haiti's Cholera Crisis

June 29, 2016

By [Ed Pilkington](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/edpilkington)

The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/29/us-congress-haiti-cholera-united-nations-obama-administration>

A bipartisan group of 158 members of Congress has accused the [Obama administration](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/obama-administration) of a failure of leadership over the cholera scandal in Haiti in which at least 30,000 people have died as a result of an epidemic caused by the United Nations for which the world body refuses to accept responsibility.

[A joint letter](https://conyers.house.gov/sites/conyers.house.gov/files/06_29_16%20Kerry%20Haiti%20Cholera%20Letter%20Final.pdf) highly critical of US policy – and devastatingly critical of the UN – has been sent to the US secretary of state, John Kerry, signed by 12 Republican and 146 Democratic members of Congress. Led by John Conyers, a Democratic congressman from Michigan, and Mia Love, a Republican congresswoman from Utah, the letter’s signatories include many of the most senior voices on foreign affairs on Capitol Hill.

The missive takes the Obama administration to task for failing to admonish the UN for its refusal to accept responsibility for the cholera outbreak. “We are deeply concerned that the State Department’s failure to take more leadership in the diplomatic realm might be perceived by our constituents and the world as a limited commitment to an accountable and credible UN,” the letter says.

It continues: “We respectfully urge the Department of State to treat the issue of a just and accountable UN response to Haiti’s cholera with the urgency that 10,000-100,000 deaths and catastrophic damage to the UN’s credibility deserves.”

Cholera erupted in Haiti in October 2010, after the bacterium was brought to the country by UN peacekeepers relocated from Nepal to help with disaster relief in the wake of the January earthquake. The joint letter to Kerry mentions a [report by the UN](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/05/leaked-un-report-sanitation-haiti-bases-cholera-outbreak) itself carried out in 2010 and leaked recently to the Guardian, which showed that the world body was fully aware that sewage at its peacekeeping bases was being dumped in the open, well after cholera was first detected.

The Congress members are excoriating about the UN’s conduct in the wake of the disaster. They note in their letter that the official death toll is almost 10,000, but the reality might be three to 10 times higher, making the [Haiti](https://www.theguardian.com/world/haiti) outbreak the worst cholera epidemic of modern times.

“While the deaths, illness, and evidence of malfeasance mounted … the UN continues to refuse to even discuss providing compensation for the losses incurred by those killed and sickened by the cholera it brought to Haiti. There is no notable progress in its proclaimed efforts to provide the water and sanitation infrastructure necessary to control the cholera epidemic.”

As part of the UN’s dogged denial of culpability, the organization has made a blanket rejection of [calls for compensation contained in a class action lawsuit](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/11/haiti-cholera-un-deaths-lawsuit) filed in New York by victims of the disaster. The world body is claiming immunity from damages in the case.

The US government chose to represent the UN’s defense in the litigation in front of the federal second circuit appeals court. That prompted the three-member panel of judges to question US lawyers over the Obama administration’s apparent unwillingness to use its diplomatic muscle to force the UN to shift its contentious position.

Brian Concannon, director of the Institute for Justice & Democracy in Haiti (IJDH) which is acting as lead counsel on the lawsuit, said: “The US government has made the unfortunate choice to stand up for UN impunity by supporting the UN’s immunity in court without doing anything to ensure that the organization upholds its legal obligations to provide remedies for victims out of court.”

With cholera still raging in parts of Haiti, and aid groups on the ground reporting ongoing suffering amid inadequate provision of medical help and sanitation, the Congress members called on the state department to “immediately and unreservedly exercise its leadership … Each day that passes without an appropriate UN response is a tragedy for Haitian cholera victims, and a stain on the UN’s reputation.”