The U.N.’s neglect of another recent pandemic stains its legacy

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AS THE novel coronavirus continues to ravage the United States and other nations, it’s worth pausing to reflect on another recent epidemic — one undoubtedly triggered by human negligence — whose toll in infections per capita exceeded that inflicted so far by covid-19 in any nation. We refer to the cholera outbreak in Haiti, the worst anywhere in modern times, that sickened more than 800,000 people and killed at least 10,000 in the years after a 2010 earthquake devastated the Western Hemisphere’s poorest country.

In that instance, the disease was introduced to Haiti by a battalion of United Nations peacekeepers from Nepal, who contaminated a major river north of Port-au-Prince, the Haitian capital, with fecal matter from their base camp. The ensuing epidemic infected roughly 7 percent of the population in a country made especially vulnerable to cholera by widespread lack of access to clean water and basic sanitation.

It was only in 2016, five years after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention traced the outbreak to the peacekeepers, that the United Nations acknowledged what it grudgingly called “its own involvement” in the epidemic. Yet even now, three years after the organization pledged to raise $400 million to address the legacy of that human-caused calamity, the United Nations has done almost nothing to help the individual victims or to improve the nation’s water and sanitation infrastructure.

That flagrant financial, administrative and moral failure was cast in a harsh light by a letter sent last month to U.N. Secretary General António Guterres by more than a dozen independent rights experts at the world body. They pointed out that while the United Nations pledged $400 million in response to the outbreak it caused, it has delivered “a pitiful $3.2 million” — an unsurprising result given that funding was left to voluntary contributions from member countries. “The importance of relief is even more urgent,” they added, “in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which could deal a double blow to victims of the cholera outbreak and their families.”

Haiti, so far, has registered relatively few cases of covid-19, perhaps partly because very little testing for the disease has been done. But of the several dozen cases that have been confirmed, a number of them had been transported to the island nation on deportation flights from the United States. The deportees were not tested for the disease before being placed on flights to Haiti by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Haiti has not had a new case of cholera in more than a year, although health experts say it will take longer than that to confirm the disease has been eliminated there. In the meantime, the United Nations’ ongoing neglect and refusal to compensate victims or upgrade basic infrastructure remain a betrayal of its fundamental mission and a stain on its legacy.