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AFRICA/MADAGASCAR - 5 million people exposed to plague

Antandrohomby (Agenzia Fides) - This year's season of bubonic plague in Madagascar has arrived earlier than expected, and with an apparent prevalence of a more deadly strain of the disease. Between the months of September and December, the local Ministry of Health has recorded 42 deaths and 84 cases in 4 of the 112 districts of the Country. Popularly known as the Black Death, the plague is caused by the bacteria Yersinia pestis which is contracted by the bite of infected fleas that transmit the bacteria to humans. The primary vector are fleas on rats and other rodents, although other animals and insects can carry the bacteria. According to the malagasy health authorities the bubonic plague can be treated easily with antibiotics that hinder the development of the disease. However, this time cases of pneumonic plague which is more difficult to treat have also been identified, and it can be fatal in just 3 days.
From two to eight days after contracting the infection, the patient develops fever and chills and swollen lymph nodes. Septicemic plague is the one that has a 50% mortality rate, higher than the bubonic and pneumonic plague, it is very rare but can be fatal if the patient is not immediately treated with antibiotics. Every year between 300 and 600 cases of bubonic plague are recorded in Madagascar, usually between October and March. Health authorities must also cope with superstitions, particularly in the more remote villages. It is thought that the plague arrived in Madagascar in 1898 from infected rats found on ships coming from India. Thanks to numerous vaccination campaigns, improved hygiene, the discovery of streptomycin and the use of insecticides, the disease was under control in the 50s. Over 30 years only from 20 to 50 cases per year were recorded in Madagascar, but since 1989 the number of suspected cases has increased steadily. According to the Centers for Disease Control and prevention of diseases in the United States, approximately five million people are exposed in the highlands of Madagascar. WHO considers the infection endemic in many parts of Africa, particularly in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Madagascar, Mozambique, Uganda and Tanzania. (AP) (Agenzia Fides 21/12/2013)

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