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French Official Quits Over Toll In Heat Wave

By JOHN TAGLIABUE

The withering heat of the last several weeks in France has been responsible for perhaps as many as 5,000 deaths, the government said today, as the crisis claimed its first political victim.

The director general for health, Dr. Lucien Abenhaim, whose office is roughly equivalent to that of the American surgeon general, submitted his resignation. He said, "Given the present polemics regarding the handling of the epidemic associated with the heat wave, I prefer to be able to explain the action of the health services calmly." The government said Dr. Abenhaim's resignation had been accepted.

The resignation came as a blow to the government of the conservative prime minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, which has rejected criticism of its role in handling the heat crisis. Mr. Raffarin said in an interview published Sunday that more than half the deaths had occurred outside the hospital system. He indicated that the cause of the crisis was not a failure of the health system, but rather the negligence of French families.

The heart of the problem, he indicated, was families who went on summer vacation, sometimes for weeks, leaving the elderly and infirm at home unattended.

The deaths appear to have been concentrated in large cities like Paris, experts said, where elderly people were more likely to have been left essentially to fend for themselves.

A former health minister, Dr. Bernard Kouchner, a founder of Doctors Without Borders, agreed. The main lesson to be drawn from the deaths, he said in a phone interview, is not a medical lesson, but a social lesson: "You have to take care of your elderly."

"We were all guilty, in a way," he said.

Neither the government nor other agencies have identified specific victims though.

Dr. Abenhaim, an accomplished epidemiologist, later defended the work of the health services, declaring that "for the moment, it has not been demonstrated that errors were made."
While temperatures have fallen considerably in recent days, and a light cooling rain swept Paris in the early morning hours today, thermometers hovered over 100 degrees in many parts of France for about a month. Health experts said the stress caused by such heat coupled with the general unpreparedness of the health system could have caused as many as 5,000 deaths.

The health minister, Dr. Jean-François Mattei, in an interview with the French radio, called the number 5,000 "plausible," though he added that it was "only a hypothesis." The government earlier gave an estimate of 3,000 deaths.

The heat is being blamed for hundreds of deaths across Europe, but by far the highest number of victims has been recorded in France.

While there are no firm figures, reports of about 40 deaths have been received from some northern Italian cities and 40 to 50 from Spain. Experts said people in those countries may have been better prepared to cope with the heat because summers there are routinely hotter.

The problem was aggravated in France both by the widespread custom of leaving elderly relatives behind at vacation time and by the practice of shutting down parts of hospitals while doctors and staff members take monthlong August vacations. Older relatives were less likely to have been left alone in countries like Spain and Italy, where more traditional family ties remain stronger, the experts indicated.

But the growing number of victims has unleashed a political storm. Last week, Mr. Raffarin cut short his August vacation to declare a state of emergency that enabled the government to call back public employees, to open military hospitals and to establish emergency morgues to handle a backlog of bodies.

But opposition leaders pounded Mr. Raffarin and his health minister, Dr. Mattei, saying the measures were too meager and came too late.

Mr. Raffarin had already come under fire in the spring because of his efforts to overhaul the laws governing several areas of French public service, including health care, driven by the need to scale back government spending in the face of a sluggish economy.

In response, waves of strikes paralyzed major French cities.

Dr. Mattei, a pediatric specialist before assuming the post of minister, contended in an interview with the French radio that the government "did not have the information and the warning signals that we should have had."

The opposition Socialist Party, which has been in disarray since its candidates were resoundingly defeated in general elections last year, has seized on the deaths to regain cohesion and mount an offensive against the government.
Its spokesman, Julien Dray, said Dr. Abenhaim's resignation "must not mask the necessary search for the truth in this drama."

A spokeswoman for the Communist Party, Marie-George Buffet, said in a statement, "The government has made an enormous political mistake, which it must take upon itself." Mr. Raffarin's policy of cutting health-care outlays, she said, "has put our health-care system in danger."

Dr. Abenhaim, in the radio interview, said the first warnings had been issued early as Aug. 8, "saying that the heat wave would have grave consequences."

"It is necessary that the French understand that this type of situation cannot always be anticipated," he added.

Some health officials acknowledged shortcomings in the way the system functioned. Gilles Brücker, the director of the Institute for Health Surveillance, a public health agency that reports to Dr. Abenhaim, said, "Very evidently, there was a lack, of which we are now collectively conscious."

Dr. Brücker said in an interview with the daily Le Monde that it was not acceptable for people to die in such numbers "without us being in a position, collectively, to know it and to deal with it."

Mr. Raffarin, however, said that government agencies and the health services were not at fault and suggested that the deaths were a result of broader social deficiencies. "Fifty percent of the deaths occurred outside of hospitals, and those who died in the emergency wards arrived in a very critical state," he said "It is a larger problem and a first lesson."

Mr. Raffarin, in an interview Sunday with the weekly Journal du Dimanche, pledged that there would be a review of the problems that emerged during the heat wave.

Dr. Kouchner, the former health minister, chided the opposition for indulging in what he called "a political game, to accuse the others."

Partly, he said, the deaths were a wake-up call to the looming problem of global warming and partly to the need for health services that are "closer to the ground."

But he emphasized that most victims were elderly people and said that many of them had been left untended in large cities while families and friends left for the August vacation.