Disease outbreaks in wake of Southeast Asia floods

More than 2000 people have reportedly died and 19 million have been displaced by monsoon floods in regions of India, Nepal and Bangladesh, where outbreaks of diarrhea and other waterborne diseases are now emerging. The stagnant waters are also a lethal breeding ground for vector-borne diseases such as malaria and dengue fever.

The WHO Southeast Asia Regional Office in New Delhi, India is “focusing on strengthening monitoring and surveillance of potential disease outbreak situations. [Nepal, India and Bangladesh] are experiencing heavy flooding and have reported increased cases of water-, vector- and food-borne diseases.” The Indian states of Bihar and Assam are under a close health watch. In Bihar, stagnant waters have put about 11 million people at risk of contracting waterborne diseases.

The UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) warned that children, who make up 40% of South Asia’s population, are especially vulnerable to the “looming health crisis.”

Doctors treated at least 1500 residents of Uttar Pradesh state for diarrhea in the first 10 days of August, and in Bangladesh, there were 1400 reported cases of diarrhea in 24 hours.

“Safe drinking water is emerging as a major issue in the flood-affected areas,” stated UNICEF. “Most tube-wells have submerged. Many affected people are reportedly using flood water. There seems to be a shortfall in the deployment of medical teams and polythene sheets for shelter.”

“Malnutrition is an important health problem for a large number of flood-affected people, especially children,” added Swapna Jana, secretary of the India-based non-governmental organization, Society for Social Pharmacology. “The plight of these malnourished people has been aggravated due to the lack of food, as a consequence of flood.”

The flooding has displaced some 150 000 people in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, and 3 million in Assam. The Indian government has distributed relief supplies and chlorine tablets to

Pavel Rahman, Associated Press

A Bangladesh army medical corps member distributes medicine to flood victims in Dhaka.

purify the water, and sent physicians and other health care professionals.

The United Nations World Food Programme warned that for many of the estimated 25 million people affected by the severe flood, long-term relief and recovery efforts are needed. The UN food program is ready to assist with food and logistical support.

“We urge donors to step forward with funding for early recovery programs, which are crucial in the wake of a crisis,” said Executive Director Josette Sheeran. “After the floodwaters subside, millions of poor families will remain devastated from the loss of their crops, livestock and, in some cases, family members.”

As of Aug. 13 (print deadline), several international aid agencies had launched appeals for funds, including Oxfam (US\$2 million) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (US\$1.7 million). India World Vision is providing safe drinking water and other necessities, and German Agro Action, aided by the German government, raised \$716 000 for relief supplied. The United States government has contributed US\$50 000.

In Bihar state, 880 mm of rain fell in 15 days this season — the heaviest rainfall in the past 30 years. The worst-hit district, Junagadh, received 471 mm of rain in 24 hours, submerging several villages under 1.8 m of water.

The UN World Meteorological Or-

ganisation said the monsoon floods are part of a record for extreme weather conditions since the start of 2007 that includes a summer heat wave in Europe, heavy rains in China and the first documented tropical cyclone in the Arabian Sea. — Sanjit Bagchi MD, Kolkata, India

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Calgary seeks help to identify *E. coli* source

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The Calgary Health Region has called in an epidemiologist with the Public Health Agency of Canada to try to identify the reason for an unusually high number of cases of *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 this summer.

In July and the first part of August, 46 people in the Calgary region were diagnosed with *E. coli* O157:H7. Normally, over that period of time the region would see 5–10 cases resulting from an infection with that strain of the bacteria, says Dr. Brent Friesen, the medical officer of health.

Eleven people were hospitalized as a result of the summer infections, and 6 had developed hemolytic uremic syndrome as of Aug. 10.