

People dying of water-borne diseases in flood-hit Pakistan



A dengue fever patient lies under a mosquito net at Lady Reading Hospital in Peshawar [Fayaz Aziz/Reuters]

Islamabad, September 21 (RHC)-- Water-borne diseases are a new concern in flood-ravaged Pakistan, with the authorities reporting at least nine such deaths in the last 24 hours, according to government data. All the deaths caused by diarrhoea, malaria and gastroenteritis were reported in the southeastern Sindh province where more than 300 people have died of flood-related ailments since July.

Sindh officials said more than 500,000 people are still displaced by the calamity and living in makeshift camps across the province. Meanwhile, the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) on Tuesday said the death toll in the catastrophic floods has risen to 1,559.

Pakistan was battered by record rains and melting glaciers beginning in the middle of June. The floods at one point submerged one-third of the nation of 220 million people, destroying more than a million homes and dozens of roads, railways and bridges.

The government, already facing an economic crisis, estimates the total financial losses due to the floods at \$30 billion and has appealed to the global community for help. Officials in Sindh, home to 48 million people, said more than 137,000 cases of diarrhoea, over 10,000 cases of dysentery and at least 4,000 confirmed cases of malaria were reported in the province this month, adding that they have set up 450 medical camps to tackle the health crisis.

“The biggest challenge we are facing is because of malaria and gastroenteritis. We don’t have enough protective nets or medical kits to detect malaria. Relief organisations and the government are regularly supplying us with required material but the magnitude of the problem is just so huge,” Amjad Mastoi, a health official in Sindh’s Dadu district told Al Jazeera.

Shahnawaz Solangi, a 53-year-old teacher in Sindh’s Naushero Feroz district, said his family was not receiving much help from the government. “Two of my children, 12 and 18 years old, have malaria for the last two weeks. We have run out of tablets. The fever breaks at times but returns in the evening,” he told Al Jazeera over the telephone.

Solangi said his family of 12 members is living in a makeshift house they built on higher ground after their village was swept away a month ago. “We don’t have any family in other cities so we along with few others from our village decided to stay back,” he said.

Last week, the World Health Organization (WHO) chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned of a looming health disaster in Pakistan. “I am deeply concerned about the potential for a second disaster in Pakistan: a wave of disease and death following this catastrophe, linked to climate change, that has severely impacted vital health systems leaving millions vulnerable,” he said in a statement.

The WHO chief said pregnant women were at risk in the affected areas. “All this means more unsafe births, more untreated diabetes or heart disease, and more children missing vaccination, to name but a few of the impacts on health,” he said.

The United Nations Population Fund in August cautioned that more than 650,000 pregnant women in flood-affected areas require urgent maternal health services, with at least 73,000 women expected to give birth in September.

Dr Khalid Memon, a health official in Sindh, told Al Jazeera they are compiling data on pregnant women taking refuge in makeshift camps. “Our district health officers are deployed across all the affected areas and so far we have registered at least 9,500 pregnant women,” he said, adding that expecting mothers were being given food supplements and anti-tetanus vaccines.

Sindh’s health minister Dr Azra Fazal Pechuho said many villages remain inaccessible and a true picture of the spread of disease and displacement of people will only emerge once the waters recede. “Floods have drowned most roads and highways ... Boats are being deployed as not just means to rescue people but also as mobile health camps,” she told Al Jazeera. “We are also asking medical universities to send their final-year students for assisting in flood relief efforts.”

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