

Regional Director's message on the occasion of World Malaria Day 25 April 2008



Malaria remains a major health problem in South-East Asia Region. The disease burden and economic loss due to the disease is enormous. In the South-East Asia Region, it is estimated that there are 20 million cases and 100 000 deaths each year from this disease. At present 1 326 million people or 83% of population in South-East Asia are at risk of malaria. The Region harbours two main malaria parasites, *Plasmodium falciparum*, which is a well-known killer, and *Plasmodium vivax*, which causes relapse episodes of malaria.

The epidemiology of malaria is dynamic and heavily affected by rapid socio-economic and ecological changes. There is also a great diversity of epidemiology due to the different kinds of mosquito vectors and their variable bionomics. The vulnerable population who are most at risk to contract the disease are generally poor and have low educational and socioeconomic status. Many of them are slum-dwellers or tribal people, and highly mobile populations who live in forests and border areas where the health system is generally weak or even absent. Member countries have realized that it is almost impossible to control malaria at international borders without strong collaboration.

Malaria is not purely a health problem; instead, it is a disease caused by complex human behaviour and a dynamic environment. Malaria is caused by poverty and at the same time it induces poverty.

Member countries have been continuously striving to control the disease. Malaria was brought under control and malaria eradication was approached during the period 1956-1966. Unfortunately, the achievement of 1960s could not be sustained. There was a subsequent resurgence of malaria in several countries and areas where malaria incidence had been brought to a very low level. Sadly, these gains have been reversed. Over time, we have learned a lot of lessons. We realize that to overcome this ancient disease, we need to be more strategic.

The scourge of malaria poses a great challenge to most malaria control programmes, health personnel, policy-makers, international agencies, partners and donor agencies. Their enormous efforts might be wasted without the right approaches and gains would be definitely lost.

Member countries in the South-East Asia Region, with support from WHO and other developmental partners, reviewed the regional malaria situation and proposed a revision of the malaria control strategy in 2006. The Revised Malaria Control Strategy for the South-East Asia Region during 2006-2010 proposed a paradigm shift in malaria control and focused on programme planning and management. At the same time, the revised strategy proposed to deploy recent effective and practical tools and interventions. Experiences have shown that malaria control programmes need to be broadened. A multisectoral approach and stronger partnership are essential.

Malaria was discussed in the World Health Assembly in May 2007, which resolved that World Malaria Day shall be commemorated annually. During the Sixtieth session of the Regional Committee

for South-East Asia Region in September 2007, Member countries called for concerted efforts to accelerate the control of malaria.

This year, Member countries outside Africa have joined hands in the observance of the first World Malaria Day. Malaria attention was previously focused primarily on Africa where the disease burden is heaviest, and Africa Malaria Day has been annually commemorated by Member countries for years. Today, it is now accepted worldwide that malaria is not only prevalent in Africa. Countries outside Africa are also badly hit.

The global community has now realized the importance of climate change and its impact on health, including malaria, a disease that is very sensitive to environmental changes. Rising temperature is known to enhance both the transmission of the disease and the growth of the parasite in mosquitoes. This could produce a public health nightmare unless we put more effort in fighting and eliminating the disease. The malaria control programmes need to be armed to battle this global threat.

World Malaria Day is an opportunity to raise global, regional and national awareness of this terrible disease which is, however, curable and preventable. Today, effective tools such as artemisinin-based combination therapy, long-lasting insecticidal nets and rapid diagnostic tests are available, practical and affordable.

World Malaria Day is also an opportunity for the South-East Asia Region to remind the world that malaria still haunts 80% of the population in this Region.

Today, we call for urgent actions by Member countries, international agencies, partners, donor agencies, other actors as well as the malaria victims to join hands in fighting malaria.



Samlee Pliangbangchang, M.D., Dr.P.H
Regional Director,
WHO South-East Asia Region