

Dengue fever sweeps through Asia, helped by hotter and wetter weather

More than 1,000 die in Bangladesh; major outbreak hits Taiwan



Bangladesh saw dengue fever outbreaks starting in late April this year, months earlier than usual. © Reuters

Dengue fever infections are surging across large swaths of Asia, spurred by climate change and unusually rainy weather, with Bangladesh's death toll this year exceeding 1,000.

Infections are up roughly 200% on the year in Thailand and Cambodia, while Taiwan is seeing a rapid surge. The outbreaks could affect their economic recoveries from the coronavirus pandemic.

A total of 206,288 dengue cases were recorded in Bangladesh from January to Oct. 1, according to UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund). The record-high 1,006 deaths were roughly quadruple the tally for all of last year. Children aged 15 and under accounted for 18% of infections and 11% of deaths.

Outbreaks in Bangladesh, which usually occur in densely populated urban areas, have now spread across the country this year. The mosquito-borne viral infection is also spreading in refugee camps for Myanmar's Rohingya Muslim minority who fled to Bangladesh as the camps face a chronic shortage of medical staff and hospital beds.

Dengue, whose symptoms include sudden fever and headache, can cause death.

Cases in Bangladesh usually increase during the July-September rainy season, but this year's wave began in late April. Unusually warm weather and heavy rainfall created an ideal environment for mosquitoes to breed.

Dengue was once considered an endemic disease largely limited to tropical and subtropical regions. But infections have been confirmed in a wide range of areas in recent years -- including Japan -- amid climate change.

The World Health Organization (WHO) says 4.2 million cases were reported globally in 2022, eight times as many as in 2000.



A dengue fever awareness campaign at a shopping mall in Bangkok. (Photo by Ken Kobayashi)

El Nino weather pattern contributing to dengue infections

Some experts say the El Nino weather pattern, which lifted sea surface temperatures off the coast of Peru, is contributing to this year's record infections.

In Southeast Asia, which was hit with widespread heat waves, Thailand had approximately 127,000 infections from January to early November -- 3.4 times the year-earlier figure. Infections in Malaysia doubled to about 100,000.

In Vietnam, cases in Hanoi alone have exceeded 28,500, roughly 2.7 times a year earlier, putting a strain on the medical system. Health officials warned hospitals in October to take measures against mosquitoes.

Countries in other parts of the world can also be affected by the outbreaks in Southeast Asia. As people resume travel after the COVID-19 slowdown, they can carry the disease to other places.

Taiwan has seen a large-scale dengue outbreak since June, mainly in the south. As of Nov. 6, 21,900 people had been infected this year, according to the island's health ministry. This marked Taiwan's second-largest outbreak in the past 10 years, after the 40,000-plus infections recorded in all of 2015. Taiwan has not had a large-scale dengue outbreak since 2016 and saw only 20 or so infections in 2022. Unusually high temperatures this year and the full-scale resumption of travel to and from overseas last fall are thought to have been a factor.

"Although the peak seems to have passed, infections are not declining as fast as expected," Health and Welfare Minister Hsueh Jui-yuan told the Legislative Yuan on Nov. 6. "Temperatures have remained high in November, as has mosquito activity," he said.

A dengue vaccine by Japan's Takeda Pharmaceutical

A dengue vaccine developed by Japan's Takeda Pharmaceutical has been approved in Thailand, Indonesia, the European Union and elsewhere, but much of the world lacks access to a vaccine. Avoiding mosquito bites is still the main method of prevention.

The Thai government announced results of a survey on Sunday showing that religious facilities, most of them Buddhist temples, are the most likely mosquito infestation spots in the country.

Thailand's Loy Krathong festival in late November, which is popular with foreign tourists, could lead to increased infections. Health authorities have issued warnings about eliminating puddles to stem mosquito breeding.

-Nikkei, Bangkok, Hanoi, Taipei, November 15, 2023