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Dengue and malaria impacting socioeconomic growth: WHO

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While countries in South-East Asia have made substantial economic progress, diseases such as dengue and malaria fuel a vicious cycle of poverty and have a significant impact on socioeconomic status of communities. These diseases are still killing thousands of people in the WHO South-East Asia Region.Â

Forty percent of the global population at risk of malaria lives in the WHO South-East Asia Region - home to a quarter of the world's population. Malaria is endemic in 10 of the 11 countries of the Region: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Timor-Leste. Maldives is the only country in the Region that has remained free of malaria (malaria-free since 1984). SriLanka made remarkable progress in controlling malaria by bringing cases down from 203 000 in 2000 to zero locally acquired malaria cases since November 2012.

"These are deadly but preventable diseases. The solution lies in a united and sustained effort from all of us. Ministries of health alone cannot control these diseases. Their control and prevention needs committed engagement from all sectors, strong political will and active community participation," said Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh, WHO Regional Director for South-East Asia. "This Region recently defeated polio, it is time for us to show the same resolve to defeat malaria, dengue and other vector- borne diseases," she added.

Vector-borne diseases account for 17% of the estimated global burden of all infectious diseases. Dengue is now the world's fastest growing vector-borne disease, with a 30-fold increase in disease incidence over the past 50 years. Outbreaks of dengue fever have now been reported from all countries in WHO's South-East Asia Region except Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Lymphatic filariasis, another mosquito-borne disease, is linked to poverty and creates disfiguring and social stigma. The Region has 60 million infected people while 875 million people are at risk of infection. To interrupt transmission, WHO recommends an annual mass drug administration of single doses of two medicines to all eligible people in endemic areas.

"With mass drug administration with effective coverage, there is no reason why diseases like lymphatic filariasis cannot be eliminated from the Region," said Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh. "Countries must prioritize vector-borne diseases in their national development agendas. Communities need to be empowered to fight this battle and protect themselves. Preventing and controlling vector-borne diseases is everyone's responsibility," she added.