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WHO SENDS CLIMATE CHANGE DISTRESS CALL

[Rachel's introduction: Nations must make urgent preparations to cope with adverse health impacts of climate change that could kill millions, the World Health Organisation now says.]

By Frances Williams in Geneva

Countries must make urgent preparations to cope with adverse health impacts of climate change that could kill millions, the World Health Organisation said on Monday.

Rising global temperatures threatened more deaths and disease from malnutrition, storms and floods, water shortages, heat waves and pollution, and insect-borne diseases such as malaria and dengue fever, the UN agency said.

"The core concern is succinctly stated: climate change endangers human health," Margaret Chan, the WHO director-general, said in a statement to mark World Health Day. "While the reality of climate change can no longer be doubted, the magnitude of consequences, and most especially for health, can still be reduced."

Poorer nations needed help to shore up fragile health systems and better systems for disease surveillance and forecasting. She urged leaders of the Group of Eight industrialised nations to address this at their Japan summit next month.

Estimates of health impact of climate change vary, but there is widespread agreement at a global level they will be negative, substantial and affect developing countries most severely.

In a November report, the UN development programme said 600m more people in sub-Saharan Africa would go hungry from collapsing agriculture. Another 400m people would be exposed to malaria and other diseases.

Malnutrition causes about 3.5m deaths each year. Periodic drought, a main cause, is to increase. Extreme weather, especially storms and floods, threatens more deaths and injuries, and outbreaks such as cholera.

Water scarcity and torrential rainfall increase the risk of diarrhoeal disease. Changing temperatures and rainfall patterns will spread malarial mosquitoes and other insect vectors.

Heatwaves in crowded urban "heat islands" could kill many elderly, as during the European heatwave of 2003, and aggravate allergies -- such as hay fever -- and atmospheric pollution.

"Climate change can affect problems that are already huge, largely concentrated in the developing world, and difficult to combat," Dr Chan said.

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