Dengue fever sweeps Asia

Thousands of people in Asia have been struck by dengue fever in recent months, putting medical services under strain and highlighting the need for a long-term strategy to fight the potentially lethal disease. The Philippines, Myanmar, Malaysia, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam are among countries that have seen significant spikes in the mosquito-borne disease, while India's capital New Delhi is in the grip of its worst dengue outbreak in almost 20 years. Hospitals are overwhelmed as thousands of people with symptoms such as high fever, vomiting and joint pain seek medical attention, health experts said.

Dengue is the world's fastest-spreading tropical disease, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO). There is no dedicated treatment for the virus, and sufferers are generally asked to rest, drink plenty of fluids and take medication to bring down fever and reduce joint pain.

"Outbreaks like the current dengue cases can have significant impacts on health systems," said Martin Hibberd, professor of emerging infectious diseases at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. "These patients are acutely ill with severe symptoms and need to be treated fast to avoid complications." The size of the outbreak has forced some hospitals to make tough choices.

In Delhi, a couple jumped to their deaths when their seven-year-old son died of dengue after being refused treatment at a number of city hospitals which said all their beds were filled with dengue patients. News reports followed of other families with acutely ill children and elderly relatives being turned away from one hospital after another due to a lack of beds or other facilities.

Dengue affected only a handful of countries in the 1950s but is now present in more than 125 — more than malaria, historically the most notorious mosquito-borne disease. The WHO estimates that about 50mn new cases of dengue fever occur each year, but a recent study said the number could be four times as high due to underreporting.

In the Asia-Pacific region the hot and humid climate and frequent flooding linked to climate change create ideal breeding conditions for dengue mosquitoes. In the Philippines concern is growing that flooding caused by Typhoon Koppu this week will cause a spike in the number of dengue cases, already up 32% year on year to 108,263 so far this year, according to the WHO. In Myanmar, much of which was flooded in July and August, authorities recorded almost 36,000 cases from January to September, 200% more than in the same period last year and the highest figure since counting began in 1965, the Myanmar Times reported.

More than 96,000 cases have been registered so far this year in Malaysia, up more than 19%, according to the WHO. Health experts say this explosion in dengue cases is closely linked to a rise in urban living as well as increased movement of people and goods. "For dengue to occur you need concentrated areas of people — it's a city-based disease and a tricky one to eradicate because the dengue mosquito bites during the day, unlike the malaria mosquito," said Hibberd.

The dengue mosquito usually lives inside houses or in courtyards and typically lays its eggs in flower pots or other places with a water source. Health experts said that while much attention had focused on eradicating malaria, which has higher mortality rates, the fight against dengue lacked a long-term plan and focused on controlling outbreaks instead.

"It requires a shift in approach from responding to isolated outbreaks to investment in strategies that cover effective vector control, access to health services and early clinical management," said Xavier Castellanos, Asia Pacific regional director of the International Federation of the Red Cross. There is no vaccine for dengue yet, but some are undergoing clinical trials. French drugmaker Sanofi SA hopes to win approval for the world's first dengue vaccine soon.

Leaders of Singaporean church found guilty of misusing funds

Six leaders of a mega-church in Singapore were found guilty of all charges of criminal breach of trust and falsification of accounts on Wednesday, concluding a long and high profile trial involving 30 million Singapore dollars of church funds.

Church founder Kong Hee, deputy senior pastor Tan Ye Peng, former fund manager Chew Eng Han, former finance managers Serina Wee and Sharon Tan and former finance committee member John Lam were all convicted of three to 10 charges each.

Local news website TODAYonline reported judge See Kee Oon saying in his judgement that all had been "inextricably tangled" in using 24 million Singapore dollars from the church budget to buy sham bond investments, then further misusing 26 million Singapore dollars to cover up the initial amount.

The money for the sham investments was used to further the pop music career of Kong’s wife Ho Yeow Sun, also known as Sun Ho. During the trial Kong said that Ho’s music career was a key part of the City Harvest Church’s Crossover Project, which uses her secular music to evangelise and bring people to the church.

Ho has worked with well-known hip-hop artists such as Wyclef Jean and achieved some measure of success in the dance club charts, but critics say her music and raunchy videos have little to do with Christianity. Judge See said he could not accept the argument that the money had to be used in order to make Ho’s album sales would be enough to re-deem the bonds, and therefore rejected the claim that they had believed the bond investments to be genuine. He noted that five of the accused had trusted in Kong’s leadership. "No matter how pure the motives and how ingrained the trust in leaders, these do not exonerate the accused persons," TODAYonline reported See as saying.

A statement signed off by Ho on behalf of the City Harvest Church management board following the verdict said that they were “disappointed by the outcome,” but thanked the congregation for their support. "Since 2012, we have had a new management and a new Church Board running the operations of the church. Therefore, let’s stay the course with CHC 2.0. God is making us stronger, purer and more mature as a congregation," the statement read.

The sentencing for all six will be decided at a later date. The penalty for criminal breach of trust could either be a life sentence or a jail term of up to 20 years, and a fine. The falsification of accounts carries a jail term of up to 10 years and a fine.

The City Harvest Church trial began in 2013, attracting public attention and concern from churchgoers. The Straits Times reported that some church members had queued overnight to secure a spot in the courtroom for the verdict.