

Seven crore people vulnerable to filariasis

Awareness campaign a must to eliminate the disease

ABDUL KADER, back from Nilphamari and Lalmonirhat

At least seven crore people in 32 districts are vulnerable to lymphatic filariasis, also known as elephantiasis, a debilitating disease caused by the thread-like parasitic filarial worms transmitted by mosquitoes.

Culex, anopheles, aedes and mansonia mosquitoes spread the disease, which may take three to ten years to manifest itself.

About 35 lakh people of the 32 districts have been suffering from lymphatic filariasis, which causes enlargement of the entire leg or arm, the genitals and breasts and damage to the kidneys and lymphatic system.

During a recent visit at the highly filariasis-prone districts in Nilphamari and Lalmonirhat, it was found that a huge number of people have contracted the disease, but most of them know nothing about it as there is no effective awareness campaign in this regard.

"I don't know how I was infected with the disease. Many people in our village are suffering from the disease," said 65-year-old Mohir at the Filaria Hospital in Nilphamari. He who hails from Tepadiriram village in Kishoreganj, Nilphamari.

Alima Begum, 45, of Syedpur upazila, who came to hospital for treatment on June 21, has been suffering from the disease for the

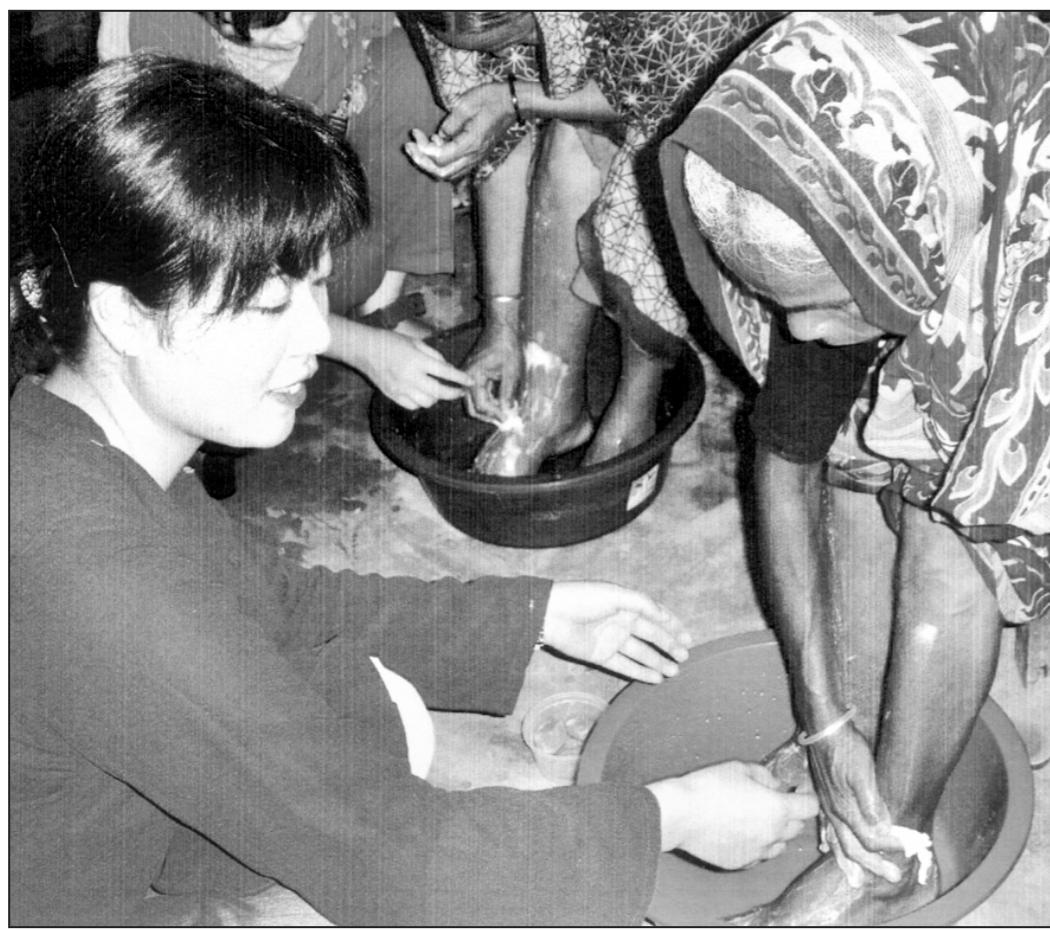


PHOTO: STAR

Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) member Hiroko Ito gives instruction to patients with filariasis on daily cleaning and exercise in Nilphamari.

last 25 years. But it was too late as her condition reached a point beyond cure. About 33 percent of the population of Nilphamari have contracted the disease.

Who are the sufferers?

The poorest of the poor are the main victims of the disease as they have less capacity to resist infections due to lack of proper nutrition.

Women make up over 50 percent

of the patients as they suffer from malnutrition, said Dr Moazzem Hossain, director of Filaria Hospital, the lone hospital of its kind in the world. The hospital is located at Dhalagach in Syedpur, Nilphamari.

At a briefing on June 21, Dr Moazzem said all the districts along the border of Rajshahi division have a large number of people infected with the disease and

Nilphamari, Panchagarh and Lalmonirhat districts have a high prevalence rate.

JOCV activities

The Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) members are playing a significant role to make people aware about the disease in five high prevalence districts, including Nilphamari, Panchagarh, Thakurgaon,

Dinajpur and Lalmonirhat, in collaboration with the district civil surgeon offices.

Masao Koda, a JOCV official, explained their activities to eliminate filariasis in line with the World Health Organisation's (WHO) goal to eliminate the disease from the world by 2020.

"Our goal is to eliminate the disease from the five districts by 2010 through disseminating information about the disease and its treatment," Koda said.

"We go from village to village in the district to make the people aware about the disease and take care of the infected hand or leg," said Hiroko Ito, another JOCV member.

At Lalmonirhat, JOCV member Masato Emoto organised a training workshop for the local NGOs on June 22 so that they can run the awareness campaign in this regard.

Government step

To eliminate the lymphatic filariasis by 2015, the government has supplied medicines to people in 10 northern districts with foreign assistance. All the 32 districts will be brought under the programme by December next, said Dr Moazzem.

Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) will provide the medicines for the next phase of filariasis elimination programme.

Dr M Sohrab Hossain Sarkar, civil surgeon in Lalmonirhat, said, "There is no allocation of funds for the filariasis elimination activities. We need funds and inter-sectoral involvement, including government and non-government organisations."

Only JOCV members are working to raise awareness among the people in the district, he said.

Climate change threatens humanity's cradle Africa

REUTERS, the Sterkfontein Caves, South Africa

Climate change in Africa gave rise to modern humans.

Now experts fear that global warming linked to carbon emissions will have its worst impact on humanity's cradle. "Africa is the most vulnerable continent to climate change," said Jennifer Morgan, director of the Global Climate Change Programme at conservation group WWF.

"Most African livelihoods depend on rain-based agriculture so droughts and floods will have a serious impact on the workforce," she said, adding that the continent's extreme poverty reduced its ability to cope. Africa's plight will be high on the agenda of a Scottish summit of the Group of Eight industrialised nations next month which could herald increased aid flows to the region.

Global warming is widely blamed on emissions of heat-trapping gases from cars, factories and power plants -- gases mostly spewed from the rich world.

"If leaders don't deal with climate change effectively they won't be doing all they can for Africa," said Morgan.

APOCALYPSE NOW

Climate change in Africa prodded mankind's distant ancestors along their evolutionary path as forests gave way to grasslands, forcing early humans into an open environment where it appears stone tools and long strides first developed.

But while most past changes in weather patterns were gradual -- giving our prehistoric ancestors a chance to adapt -- the pace of global warming today could overwhelm modern Africa.

The United Nations projects that temperatures may rise by 1.4-5.8 Celsius by the year 2100.

Desertification threatens to drive millions of Africans from their homes, said a recent international report drawing on the work of 1,360 scientists in 95 nations.

The problem is illustrated by gullies of eroded, barren earth scarring the shoreline of Lake Victoria, which borders Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. The Kenya-based World Agroforestry Centre says one of them, the Katuk-Odeyo gully, now extends to a remarkable 45 km.

Global warming may already be a source of violence in central Nigeria, where nomadic cattle herders and peasant farmers have been locked in conflict over scarce land for decades as the desert

creeps southwards.

Deforestation, dwindling water supplies and rising sea levels could spark mass migrations, provoking ethnic conflict.

"Regions that are already least secure in food production, like sub-Saharan Africa, stand to be worst affected by global warming as wet areas become wetter and dry areas become drier," says a recent global report on climate change.

Uganda's climate has become hotter and it rains more erratic in the last decade, researchers and the government say, posing a threat to its key coffee crop.

Rising sea temperatures are also among the threats seen to the coral reefs off Africa's lush east coast, the life-blood of poor coastal communities dependent upon fisheries and tourism.

HUMANITY'S CRADLE

And this tragedy of the weather is unfolding across the continent where climate change gave birth to modern humans.

The evidence for this is embedded in the Sterkfontein caves, 30 km (18 miles) northwest of Johannesburg, where hominid fossils dating back over 4 million years have been unearthed.

"There was a drying up of Africa around 2.5 million years ago ... There was a change from forest to

grassland," said Dr. Ron Clarke, who heads excavations at Sterkfontein.

Intriguingly, it was in this period that the Sterkfontein fossil record reveals our ancestors first making stone tools.

"The change in climate may have forced us into an open environment with new challenges which meant we had to adapt by using tools. That of course is speculation," Clarke said.

Climate change would continue to steer humanity's path.

"About 130,000 ago, the climate switched ... briefly into a warmer, moister mode," write Chris Stringer and Robin McKie in their book "African Exodus: The Origins of Modern Humanity."

"The deserts began to and the forests to expand again, a situation that probably led to prototype modern humans' first tentative steps out of Africa into the Middle East 120,000 years ago," they say.

The Sterkfontein Caves, surrounded by rolling farms, are again witness to environmental change -- this time man-made.

"The water table below the caves is dropping because it is being pumped out by local farmers," said Clarke. And water in the area will become more scarce if temperatures rise as fast as some fear.

Water supply for all city dwellers by next yr: Minu

BSS, Rajshahi

Mayor of Rajshahi Mijanur Rahman Minu, MP, yesterday said the city-dwellers would be brought under water supply coverage by the current fiscal year.

He said this while he was addressing as the chief guest a function organised on the occasion of foundation laying of a water treatment plant at Hatemkhan here yesterday.

Official sources said the plant would be built under the 'City Water Supply Project (2nd phase)', which is being executed at an estimated cost of Tk 26.48 crore under the supervision of Public Health Engineering Department (DPHE).

Three water treatment plants, 15 production pumps and 235 kilometres pipeline would be set up under the project, the sources said.

On the other hand, setting up of

three other treatment plants, 20 production pumps and 116-kilometre pipeline was completed under the first phase, which was implemented at a cost of Tk 20.49 crore.

Minu said that at least 58 percent city-dwellers would be brought under the purified water supply coverage with the successful implementation of the second phase work.

Referring to the misuse of supplied water, he sought cooperation of the citizens in this regard.

With RCC Ward Commissioner Tariqu Alam Paltu in the chair, the function was also addressed by Superintending Engineer of DPHE Mustafizur Rahman, Superintending Engineer of RCC Sarit Datta Gupta, Project Director Afzal Hossain and Ward Commissioner Zahidul Islam.