

Dengue kills over 100 children in Cambodia

REUTERS, Phnom Penh

Dengue fever has killed at least 102 Cambodian children this year in one of the worst outbreaks of the mosquito-borne disease since 1998, the government and World Health Organisation said on Thursday.

More than 10,000 children have contracted the disease so far this year compared to 6,000 in the same period of 2005, said Ngan Chantha, director

of the Health Ministry's national dengue programme.
In the impoverished Southeast Asian nation's last major outbreak in 1998, 424 children died out of 16,260 infected, he said.
After decades of civil war and the Khmer Rouge genocide, Cambodia's public health system remains rudimentary, with much of its funding coming from foreign aid.



PHOTO: STAR

Jatiya Shikkha Sangskritik Andolon organises a meeting in memory of artist and freedom fighter Nitun Kundu at the Liberation War Museum in the city yesterday.

After five years of war, US military shows fatigue

REUTERS, Washington

Five years of warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan have left signs of wear and tear on the US military, raising questions about its ability to sustain its current level of operations and confront potential new crises.

The US-led invasion of Afghanistan, ordered following the September 11 attacks, began on October 7, 2001, thrusting the all-volunteer US military into combat that has continued unabated there and, since March 2003, in Iraq.

Senior military officers, including Army Chief of Staff Gen Peter Schoomaker, have warned of falling combat readiness of some units and mounting equipment shortfalls, with Abrams tanks, Bradley Fighting Vehicles and other equipment battered from extended use on the battlefield.

Many troops are facing second and third long combat tours and less time between overseas deployments. At the same time, the US death toll mounts, with more than 2,730 troops killed in Iraq and about 280 more in Afghanistan.

"We're in the early stages of some

sort of crisis that, if not addressed, will result in breaking the force," said retired Army Col Andrew Bacevich, a military expert at Boston University. "You'd have to be remarkably naive to think that we're going to be able to continue to place this level of stress on the force for all that much longer."

The last five years mark the first time the all-volunteer force has been tested by protracted warfare. The draft ended in 1973. Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld opposes resuming it.

Lexington Institute defence analyst Loren Thompson said the Navy was the only service in genuinely good shape in a military of 1.42 million active-duty troops and 830,000 part-time reserves. "The ground forces -- the Army and the Marine Corps -- are in a very rundown and beleaguered state. And the Air Force's fleet of aircraft has become almost archaic, they're so aged," he said.

Pentagon officials defend the condition of the military.

"We are a nation at war," said Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman. "The armed forces of this nation are not only up to the task, they are performing their missions

superbly."

The military has been at the very least strained in sustaining the current troop levels of 141,000 in Iraq and 21,000 in Afghanistan. For example, it has had to postpone the scheduled departure of two 4,000-strong Army combat brigades from Iraq and accelerate the deployment of a third.

With the Army and Marines stretched thin, the Pentagon has converted thousands of Navy and Air Force personnel into ground troops to do jobs like driving trucks and guarding detainees.

OTHER HOT SPOTS A CONCERN

A major concern for the US top brass is the military's ability to respond if hostilities broke out in another hot spot such as Iran or North Korea.

With so much of the Army and Marines tied down in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Navy and Air Force might have to carry the load, meaning air strikes and naval blockades rather than a big commitment of ground forces.

Abroad mobilisation of hundreds of thousands of National Guard and Reserve personnel also might be deemed necessary, but such a move risks a backlash from US communities from which part-time troops would be plucked from civilian lives. The Pentagon already has made heavy use of them. As recently as last year, they made up 40 percent of the Iraq force.

The Army has compelled 75,000 soldiers, including 11,000 currently, to continue serving after their voluntary stints ended, under a policy called "stop loss" intended to keep units designated to go to Iraq and Afghanistan fully manned. Some soldiers can be forced to stay in the Army an extra 18 months, a practice some critics in Congress call a "backdoor draft."

Brookings Institution defence analyst Michael O'Hanlon noted other signs of stress on troops, including upticks in divorce rates and suicides and the departure of mid-level officers. "I think morale is very fragile right now and in danger of getting a lot worse very soon," O'Hanlon said.

So far, the military has hit its targets for "retention" -- convincing current troops to re-enlist for more duty.

Putin's Chechen strongman protege comes of age

REUTERS, Grozny

Ramzan Kadyrov, the strongman whose personal militia runs Russia's Chechnya on the Kremlin's behalf, turned 30 on Thursday making him eligible to run for the region's presidency.

The Kadyrov clan have helped the Kremlin subdue a decade-long separatist rebellion. But rights groups say the price the Kremlin has paid for relative peace is handing over control of the region to a man they say is a thug.

Kadyrov on Thursday presided over a ceremony to re-open his region's airport, which has been closed since fighting between separatists and Russian troops started in 1994.

"The Internet is full of stories about how I cannot wait for my birthday so I

can take the president's post. I have said many times I am not ready for this job," Interfax news agency quoted Kadyrov as saying.

But Kadyrov, who as prime minister is Chechnya's No. 2 official, has also previously said if Chechens demanded he become president then he would take up the post.

The constitution of mainly Muslim Chechnya bars anyone under 30 from running for the presidency. Chechen President Alu Alkhanov has a much lower profile than Kadyrov.

"This is the biggest present for me," a smiling and suited Kadyrov said outside the newly opened airport on the northern fringe of Chechen capital Grozny after the first passenger plane from Moscow in 12 years landed.