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Climate change can spur dengue in South India

NEW DELHI: Though dengue is still not a public health issue in the South, the mosquito-borne disease can emerge as a big public health threat in the four southern states, thanks to climate change.

Because of steady temperature rise, dengue may become a common disease by 2085 in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka all of which have a long coast line, said eminent public health expert Dr Anthony J McMichael who met key Indian officials here last week.

The Australian expert's visit preceded the climate change convention in Thailand which is trying to find out a way to clean the earth after the Kyoto Protocol expired in 2012.

Barring one major outbreak way back in 1968, dengue is not known to have caused a serious public health problem in the southern states so far.

But Dr McMichael who played a central role in the Noble-prize winning UN inter-governmental panel on climate change's (IPCC) assessment of health impacts of climate change said the prevalence of dengue can be more than 1 per cent in these states, if temperature rise due to climate change continues unabated.

Moreover, it will reduce the number of workable days. For instance, if Delhi temperature goes up by seven degrees, the workable days for heavy work in a year would be just 50 instead of 365. This will lead to a sharp adverse impact on the economic growth.

The IPCC expert gave the grim warnings at a public health lecture which was attended by the top brass of the Union Health Ministry including Health Secretary Naresh Dayal, Director General of Health Services Dr R K Srivastava and the chief of Public Health Foundation of India Dr K Srinath Reddy.

Climate Change's health impacts are already visible. The latest UNDP Human Development Report points out that in 2005, officially more than 400 died in India due to the sweltering heat that engulfed the sub-continent. With temperature rise, humidity will also go up thereby triggering more outbreaks of tropical diseases.

Rapid deterioration of public health may take place because the temperature is changing very fast. During the last ice age, it changed by 7-8 degrees over 5,000 years. On the other hand, the world is now facing a realistic chance of temperature rise by four degrees in only 100 years.