EL NIÑO OUTLOOK AND SPECIFIC HEALTH CONCERNS

SOUTH-EAST ASIA AND SOUTH WEST PACIFIC

Below-average rainfall is expected to endure until March 2016 in Indonesia, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Fiji, Vanuatu, Tonga and Niue. If no wet season arrives in the Pacific over the coming months, many countries' water supplies will not be replenished until the following wet season at the end of 2016 or beginning of 2017. The drought situation is heavily affecting Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu where water and food shortages are starting to impact on nutritional and health status. This will create an additional burden on already constrained health services. Indonesia declared a state of emergency in September 2015 in several regions due to water shortages and forest fires that caused a dramatic increase in respiratory and cardiovascular diseases.

PACIFIC CYCLONE SEASON

Even though drier-than-normal conditions are projected, above-normal risk of typhoons is anticipated during the December 2015 -May 2016 Pacific cyclone season and may extend beyond this during an El Niño year. Eleven to thirteen tropical cyclones are expected to occur compared to a usual average of ten to twelve (three to seven of these are expected to reach category 4 or 5) that could damage health infrastructure and lead to increased water- and vector-borne diseases and further impact on food availability and nutrition. The tropical cyclone risk is highly elevated for the Solomon Islands, Wallis & Futuna, Tokelau, Samoa, northern Cook Islands and French Polynesia; and it is elevated for Vanuatu, Fiji, Niue and the southern Cook Islands.

EASTERN PACIFIC

Higher-than-usual precipitation is foreseen during the main growing months in 2016. Extended rainfall and floods may destroy roads, hospitals and clinics, restricting access to healthcare. Damaged water and sanitation infrastructure can lead to contaminated drinking water, and the proliferation of water-borne diseases such as diarrhoea and other enteric disease outbreaks. These disasters can displace populations, leading to overcrowding and psychosocial impacts.

As a result of the 1997-1998 El Niño conditions, the Pacific Islands region was hit by a drought so severe that 50% of Fiji’s population required government water delivery, and the sugarcane harvest was slashed by 50% with widespread economic impacts.

WHO PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE ACTIONS IN ASIA

• Summary of preparedness and response actions taken by the WHO Office in the South Pacific and in Papua New Guinea:
  • Coordinating advocacy and sensitization with Member States;
  • Assisting Ministries of Health with El Niño preparedness and response planning;
  • Deploying human resources to facilitate public health risk assessments in Fiji, PNG, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu and Western Samoa;
  • Undertaking malnutrition screening in Vanuatu;
  • Prepositioning water purifying tablets and emergency health kits in Suva for possible deployment to affected countries;
  • Supporting Ministries of Health with water storage efforts in Tonga;
  • Scaling-up preparedness for the upcoming cyclone season in coordination with Health and Nutrition Clusters;
  • Assisting Ministries of Health with resource mobilization.