

Encephalitis kills 215 in India, toll expected to soar

August 28 2010, by Pratap Chakravarty

At least 215 people, mostly children, have died in an outbreak of Japanese encephalitis in an impoverished region of northern India and the death toll is likely to soar, officials said Saturday.

Eastern parts of India's most populous state Uttar Pradesh are ravaged by [encephalitis](#) each year as malnourished children succumb to the virus which is transmitted by mosquitoes from pigs to humans but this is one of the worst outbreaks, officials said.

The deaths of four more children on Saturday pushed the toll to 215, with hundreds sick, some two to a bed, in hospitals in Gorakhpur, a deeply neglected area of 14 million people, regional health officer U.K. Srivastava told AFP by telephone from Gorakhpur.

"A total of 1,324 patients had been admitted in hospitals until Saturday in Gorakhpur," which is the epicentre of the outbreak, and "more encephalitis patients are coming into our hospitals," Srivastava said.

The outbreak began in early July.

"We fear the total number of encephalitis cases will go up to at least 3,500 and the death rate will be at a ratio of around 20 percent," he said.

Encephalitis causes [brain inflammation](#) and can result in brain damage. Symptoms include headaches, seizures and fever. Health experts say 70 million children nationwide are at risk of encephalitis.

Heavy annual monsoon rains coupled with overflowing rivers coursing through Gorakhpur are making it tougher for health workers battling the disease.

"We have begun spraying [insecticide](#) to wipe out populations of the culex mosquitos which transmits the disease and we're handing out chlorine to villagers to disinfect drinking water supplies," Srivastava said.

K.P. Kushwaha, chief paediatrician at Gorakhpur's BRD Medical College, said doctors were overwhelmed as the government had been unable to fill 27 of 30 vacant posts at the state-run facility.

"As a result we're working around the clock as the children's ward has 400 patients and 150 have encephalitis and each one is a medical emergency," he said.

"Encephalitis usually surfaces by August but this year patients began coming in from early July" and if it continues this is going to be "an impossible task to handle," he added.

V.S. Nigam, in charge of Uttar Pradesh's encephalitis prevention programme, said a mammoth project to contain the disease had ended with 35 million children vaccinated in the state's 34 districts.

But as soon children are vaccinated against Japanese encephalitis, they fall sick with acute encephalitis syndrome "because when one virus is suppressed by vaccines, others become dominant," he said.

"It's a large challenge," he added.

The regional chapter of the Voluntary Health Association, India's largest non-governmental organisation, which works alongside the UN

Children's Fund (UNICEF), blamed the annual tragedy on the state's failure to effectively immunise children.

"A high alert is sounded only after an encephalitis epidemic flares," association executive director J.P. Sharma said.

"Preventive steps should be taken well ahead of the monsoon as vaccines need an incubation period to make human beings immune to the virus," Sharma told AFP.

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