

WHO: 1 billion suffer from hidden tropical disease

October 14 2010, By COLLEEN BARRY , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- The World Health Organization estimated Thursday that 1 billion of the world's poorest people suffer from neglected tropical diseases such as dengue, rabies and leprosy that remain concentrated in remote rural areas and urban slums despite being mostly eradicated from large areas of the world.

WHO is launching a campaign to prevent these "hidden" diseases, drawing attention to the silent suffering of the mostly impoverished victims totaling more than one-third of the 2.7 billion people worldwide who live on less than \$2 a day.

It identified 17 diseases and disease groups present in 149 countries. Thirty countries have six or more of the diseases.

"They cause massive but hidden and silent suffering, and frequently kill, but not in the numbers comparable to the deaths caused by HIV/AIDs, tuberculosis or malaria," said WHO director general Margaret Chan.

Still, Chan said that the diseases take a serious toll that serves to "anchor large populations in poverty."

Two of the diseases, onchocerciasis, known as river blindness, and trachoma, a bacterial eye infection, cause blindness. [Leprosy](#) and [lymphatic filariasis](#), or elephantiasis, leave victims deformed, hamper productivity and normal [social interaction](#), Chan said. Sleeping sickness, or human African trypanosomiasis, debilitates before it kills. Left

untreated, rabies is fatal.

The stigma was especially hard on girls and women. "Many neglected tropical diseases cause disfigurement and disability, leading to stigma and social discrimination," diminishing marriage prospects and raising the likelihood of abandonment for women and girls, the report said.

Diseases like dengue don't garner the same sort of international response because the victims lack a political voice, and the diseases don't tend to spread to distant countries and only rarely affect travelers, the report said.

Among the strategies to control the [neglected tropical diseases](#) are expanding preventative chemotherapy, which means treating whole populations where such diseases are identified with drugs that may knock out several of the diseases at once.

The report also recommends doing a better job of identifying the diseases, improving sanitation and controlling insects and animals, which can spread the diseases into human populations.

Chan said the campaign is aimed at making a "deliberate effort" to eradicate the diseases as a means to alleviate poverty, rather than waiting for them to "gradually disappear as countries develop."

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