

**World Health Organization  
Dhaka, Bangladesh**

Speech of Dr Duangvadee Sungkhobol, WHO Representative to Bangladesh on the occasion of **World Health Day 2008: “Protecting Health from Climate Change”**

Date: 7 April 2008

*Ladies and Gentlemen:*

I am delighted to be here with you today to observe World Health Day which this year takes the theme “Protecting Health from Climate Change”. This is a theme that has particular relevance to Bangladesh as one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change; the effects of which will threaten not only human health but also livelihoods, ecosystems, food production, water resources and even human settlement.

Bangladesh is already recognised as a leading voice among developing countries in calling for the stepping-up of international mitigation efforts. I am sure that the resilience of the Bangladeshi people will also be acknowledged for their ability to prepare and adapt to the challenges of climate change. However, they cannot do it alone; the health sector has the responsibility for developing adaptive capacity to protect health from climate change – from the national level to the community level.

Without doubt climate change is an issue that concerns everyone in all corners of the World and from all walks of life. And yet, many people still think of climate change as an exclusively environmental issue. We must urgently raise awareness about the projected health impacts of climate change. These include **direct health effects** resulting from extreme weather events such as cyclones and floods which cause injury, and loss of life. Over the longer term livelihoods are threatened which makes it more difficult for people to maintain good health.

Cyclones and floods make news headlines but climate change produces more gradual changes that will **indirectly have a negative health impact**. For example, many infectious diseases are climate-sensitive, especially vector-borne diseases such as malaria, dengue, leishmaniasis and filariasis. Changes in rainfall, humidity and temperature may prolong the season of such diseases or introduce them to new locations. Research has also shown that cholera epidemics are related to climate and climatic events such as the El Niño cycle

Within Bangladesh there are regions that are either showing early signs of climate change or are highly vulnerable to climate change. For example, I am told that spring water sources in the Chittagong Hill Tracts are exhibiting lower flows than are normal; there is concern that droughts in the north-western part of the country may become more prolonged, and low-lying coastal areas will suffer further saline intrusion. The consequences of these local effects will be an increased risk of diarrhoeal disease and malnutrition.

Ultimately the combined effects of climate change may lead to population migration because of the loss of livelihoods or ability to carry out even subsistence farming. Migration brings associated risks of HIV/AIDS, and people that are forced to give up their established homes often suffer psycho-social health problems.

Health researchers are approaching the question of climate change and health from three different perspectives: they are looking at (1) the existing relationships between climate and health; (2) the effects of recent changes in climate; and (3) modelling future impacts on health.

The cumulative evidence is convincing and sufficient to justify taking action now in anticipation of the health impacts of climate change.

Among the first steps of a coordinated approach in the health sector was a workshop on climate change and health jointly organised by DGHS and WHO, held in Dhaka last November. The main outcome of this workshop was a proposed **Framework for a National Action Plan to Reduce the Health Burden from Climate Change in Bangladesh**. The goal of the National Action Plan is “**to reduce the disease burden from current and projected risks due to climate change by empowering and equipping health system institutions in the country.**”

WHO Bangladesh stands ready to support the health sector to further refine this action plan in order that a coherent set of actions are planned and will include: the promotion of widespread population awareness, the development of health-specific mitigation and adaptation strategies based on vulnerability assessments, and effective inter-sectoral coordination concerning decisions on climate change that enhance public health.

During the course of the 2008-09 biennium WHO Bangladesh will work closely with the Government to organise national and divisional level seminars on climate change and health; we will contribute to the development of national adaptive capacity; we will develop and disseminate IEC materials for use in school and other educational establishments, and we will continue to further strengthen our ongoing collaboration with the Government in the areas of disease surveillance, vector-borne disease control, emergency preparedness and response, and environmental health promotion.

Protecting health from climate change is a very real and substantial challenge that we face today. However, I am confident that a partnership approach both within the health sector and across other sectors and disciplines will enable us to rise to this challenge. As we celebrate World Health Day 2008 we should embrace the opportunity to work more closely than ever before for the health of the people of Bangladesh.

In closing I would like to express my thanks for inviting me here today and permitting me to share my views on this most important issue. I wish all of you much success in working towards mitigation and adaptation to climate change, and can assure you of the full support of WHO.

Thank you.