Once bitten twice shy? Not in dengue-ridden Lanka

Authorities frantic to counter public carelessness

By Joshua Surendran

The primary focus of the dengue awareness campaign this month is on cleaning public areas, finding mosquito-breeding grounds, smocking mosquito-infected areas and creating awareness of hazard reduction, Health Services Director-General Dr DG Mahipala said.

The campaigns being conducted in the Colombo, Kalutara and Gampaha districts in the Western Province will continue throughout the next three months.

In the next few days they aim to check up to 117,000 houses.

In three-day campaign in the Colombo city they searched more than 38,000 houses and private lands, in some instance warning the public to clean up their gardens, gutters, drains etc. while legal action was instituted against some.

We ask people to keep their home, school and work premises clean. Each house with a clean environment will be handed a green sticker and our main focus is to ensure that all houses receive this sticker,” he added.

Dr Hasitha Tissera, a specialist attending to the Epidemiology Unit at the Ministry of Health, said, The dengue situation in Sri Lanka escalated from 2009, and there is a further risk of it increasing as well this monsoon season.”

He said the aim is to reduce deaths caused by dengue.

Dengue has claimed the lives of 50 and in the last six months alone, and the City of Colombo itself has reported the highest number of dengue cases.

Health officials suspect that this will increase with the forthcoming rainy season.

Dr Tissera added, Common breeding grounds for the dengue mosquito include discarded containers (40 per cent), water tanks (20 per cent), discarded tyres (20 per cent), gutters (0.2 per cent). Us 8641 schools and in 4469 of these schools we discovered potential breeding sites for these mosquitoes – 225 of these places were confirmed positive.

Entomological surveys conducted in 2014 also showed the discovery of 19 dengue mosquito-positive areas in 25 government institutions visited.

The lack of public participation in clearing infestation-prone localities and local environments has caused primary concern among the officials. Many of them believe that this virus, which has no cure could only be countered through public cooperation.

Once an area is reported we visit the premises, inform the residents and make them aware of the situation, Dr Tissera said. Regardless of that when we visit the same premises two weeks later the situation still remains the same. It is the behaviour patterns of people that must be changed.”

Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) will launch the Social Media App where cleaning in Colombo can be reported. Information including photos about mosquito breeding sites to CMC through smart phones. Using this app, residents can also check for high-risk areas and report dengue to the CMC.

The CMC said that 20% of the potential breeding sites were in the western province.

The Coastal Province has recorded the highest number of cases followed by the Central and Southern provinces.

In the first six months, there were 18,339 cases of dengue reported.

While the incidence of dengue fever has increased by 61% in June this year compared with the figure last year.

The number of patients in June this year is over 450 while last year the number was 251. According to Epidemiology Unit of the Ministry of Health.

The total number of patients has also increased compared to last year by 100 according to the Unit.

A CMC source said the Public Health Department has started a new program in some areas where inside of houses are being sprayed instead of the usual practice of spraying and fogging in the vicinity of homes.

This has resulted in a 98% reduction in the number of cases. According to epidemiologists, the number of cases has decreased during this same period, the others sources said.

People have been affected by this sudden decision as the routine mosquito control program has been stopped during the peak dengue season.

The CMC source said, “It is only when a death occurs that they turn up and check at the health authority.”

There have been many occasions where we have made reports but filed cases in court. A fair warning is given to each household prior to the arrests,” he said.

Dengue has claimed the lives of approximately 1100 lives in the past seven years.

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