By 2030, climate shift may kill 250k more per year

NEW DELHI: Climate change is likely to kill 250,000 more people each year by 2030, latest assessment by the World Health Organisation (WHO) shows. Most of these deaths will be caused from malaria, diarrhoeal disease, heat stress and malnutrition.

India, which already has a high burden of these diseases, is expected to contribute significantly to the global death toll. A separate study conducted by the University of Oxford, published in the international medical journal Lancet earlier this year, projected 130,000 deaths in the country from climate change in 2050.

The heaviest burden of diseases due to climate change will fall on children, women, elderly and the poor, further widening health inequalities between and within populations, WHO said. It asked countries, including India, to spend more to protect itself from health risks linked to climate, such as extreme weather events and outbreaks of infectious diseases.

The UN agency had set up an agenda and proposed key actions for its implementation during its recent Paris meet. WHO estimates that climate change is already causing tens of thousands of deaths every year.

These deaths arise from more frequent epidemics like cholera, as well as the vast geographical distribution of diseases like dengue and from extreme weather events, like heat waves and floods.
At the same time, nearly seven million people die each year from diseases caused by air pollution, such as lung cancer and stroke. More than half of these air pollution related deaths are being reported from China and India, with the latter's contribution to this dismal statistic being 1.59 million.

Climatic conditions intensely affect diseases transmitted through water and insects. According to WHO's assessment, in the next 15 years, heat exposure will cause around 38,000 deaths. Deaths due to diarrhoea are projected to reach 48,000, as many as 60,000 due to malaria and 95,000 owing to childhood malnutrition.

Highlighting the benefits of switching to cleaner energy sources, WHO said it will reduce air pollutants, besides providing desperately needed power for health facilities. "The health sector should themselves make a greater effort to promote low-carbon healthcare facilities and technologies; these can simultaneously improve service delivery and reduce costs as well as climate and environmental impacts," it said.

WHO has called for adoption of a new approach to link health economics assessment and climate change. For instance, by calculating the healthcare costs avoided when countries invest in mitigation of climate emissions. It has also announced a new working group which will articulate a coherent approach to health economics and climate change.