

Water lethal than terror

UN REPORT Polluted water kills more people than all forms of violence

Chetan Chauhan

■ chetan@hindustantimes.com

NEW DELHI: Water is lethal like never before.

Polluted water is killing more people globally than all forms of violence, including war and terror. Half of the victims are children, a UN report has said. In India, over 1 lakh people die of water-borne diseases annually.

Wastewater, a cocktail of fertiliser run-off and sewage disposal, will be one of the biggest dangers to environment with world population expected to double in 40 years, says the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) report released on Monday, the World Water Day.

Countries such as India — with a capacity to treat just 30 per cent of the wastewater and child malnourishment rate of 46 per cent — will be most vulnerable.

Drinking water in one-third of India's 600 districts has a high fluoride content, as a result 65 million people are suffering from

fluorosis, which causes crippling problems, says a Planning Commission report. One-fourth of the districts have high salinity and nitrate content in water.

To top it, hospitals in the worst affected districts do not have a system of early detection of ill-effects of contaminated water. "By the time the disease is detected, it is too late for cure," said a commission official, who didn't wish to be identified.

Things are changing, but slowly.

In February, Dalit village of Halsi in Bihar got its first toilet. A month earlier, all homes in a village in Orissa's Koraput district had got toilets. "We used to defecate near the stream, the only source of water for the village. Many elders and children died each year due to water-borne diseases," recalled Abudu Gangi, a villager.

Every year across the world, more than 3 million people die of water diseases, including 1.2 million children — one child every 20 seconds, estimates UNEP.

TOXIC FLOW



1.8 million children die of water-related diseases every year.

90% of cases of diarrhoea, which kills 2.2 million every year, are due to contaminated water.

50% of malnutrition in the world is related to diarrhoea.

90% of wastewater is untreated in developing countries. People in rich countries discharge five-times more wastewater than those in developing.

INDIA

- Only 30 p.c. of wastewater is treated.
- Of more than 600 districts, drinking water in 203 has high fluoride content, 206 high iron, 109 high nitrate and 35 high arsenic content. Fluorosis has affected 65 million people, arsenicosis 5 million in West Bengal.
- 90 p.c. of untreated sewage is released into oceans.