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Dismal South Asia healthcare situation: MHDC report

■ Report says Pakistan stands 144th in global health index ■ Over 70 percent of urban population have no access to flush-toilets
■ 500 women per 100,000 die in childbirth ■ Over 16 million people in South Asia malnourished

By Shahzad Raza

ISLAMABAD: South Asia presents a dismal healthcare scenario and Pakistan has a poor record in terms of child health, infant and maternal mortality rates and lacks adequate sanitation and public access to healthcare services.

These observations were made in a report entitled, Human Development in South Asia 2004: The Health Challenge, launched by the Mahbubul Haq Human Development Centre (MHDC) on Monday.

According to the global Health Index (HI), Pakistan stands 147th among 177 countries in terms of providing adequate healthcare services to its people. It stands in second last position among South Asian countries with an HI value of 0.458.

The report said maternal mortality ratios in Pakistan in 2000 stood at 500 deaths per 100,000 live births. By 2001, child mortality rates in Pakistan were 109 deaths per 1,000 live births.

Pakistan had the highest fertility rate in South Asia, which stood at 5.1 births per women in 2001. The report said over 86 percent of total births in rural areas took place at home. Some 51 percent women give birth at home in urban areas.

The report said 80 percent of the urban population and 26 percent of the rural population had access to toilets with flushes.

Only 14 percent of households had access to underground drains, while 49 percent of households had no access to any type of drainage system.

State Bank Governor Dr Ishrat Hussain, said the healthcare situation in Pakistan was disappointing. "The reason for all these problems remains the poor governance of the human development sector," he said. He said there were ambiguities in the distribution of responsibilities on a federal, provincial and district level, adding an overlapping of jobs created considerable confusion.

He stressed the need to trust policy-making bodies who had a clear approach and demanded that regulatory bodies exist outside government influence.

In reference to poor management, the governor discouraged the entry of professionals in administrative affairs. Numerous bureaucratic hurdles and a lack of accountability was a problem, he said, adding that more vigilance by representatives of locals was required.

Dr Salman Shah, advisor to the prime minister, told the audience that the government was considering a six-seven percent increase in allocation for social sector development. MHDC President Khadija Haq gave a brief outline of the report.

The report said 92 out of 1,000 children under the age of five die in South

Asia - Pakistan occupies top position with 117 deaths. Around 30 percent of children do not receive immunisation against preventable diseases.

The maternal mortality ratio in South Asia is 516 per 100,000 live births. Around one-third of South Asians live in absolute poverty. Two-thirds of South Asians lack access to sanitation, while more than five million people have HIV/AIDS.

The report said good health was a basic right of every individual, which should be guaranteed and protected by the state. It cited the constitutions of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka as clearly defining that provision of healthcare services remained the state's duty.

Children Health: Despite a reduction in the number of malnourished children in South Asia, it is estimated that two out of five children will still be malnourished in 2020. South Asia faces a huge problem of both communicable and non-communicable diseases.

Communicable diseases are still a major cause of death among South Asian children. In 2001, there were 2.4 million infant deaths. Malaria is responsible for five percent of children deaths in South Asia. The report said millions of children in South Asia were at risk from abuse, violence, discrimination and trafficking. An estimated 135 million children are engaged in child

labour. There are around 10,000 street children in the cities of Lahore and Karachi.

HIV/AIDS had deprived many South Asian children of one or both parents. In 2003, some 120,000 children up to the age of 14 had HIV/AIDS in India. In 2001, over 2,100 children were orphaned by AIDS in Bangladesh, 13,000 in Nepal and 2,000 in Sri Lanka.

Poverty: About 32 percent of people in South Asia earn less than one dollar a day. However, the majority have to pay for healthcare. According to one study, poorer people in the developing world spend more than 70 percent of their income on health.

In South Asia despite more than 70 percent of people live in rural areas, health care facilities are centred in urban areas.

Illiteracy: At least 394 million adults in South Asia are still illiterate. The report observed that 57 percent of the adult female population in South Asia tend to have higher rates of fertility, mortality and morbidity.

Malnourishment: The report said South Asia has the largest number of undernourished people in the world. The number of undernourished people had increased by 16.6 million from 1995 to 2001.

One in every four people in South Asia is undernourished due to poverty.

Poor infrastructure: The report observed that the largest impediment facing

the South Asian health sector was the state of the healthcare system. On average, South Asian countries spend only 4.8 percent of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on public and private healthcare services, which is lowest in the world. In Pakistan, 49 percent of poorer patients have to travel over six kilometres for medical help.

Sanitation: South Asian countries have failed to provide adequate sanitation to their rapidly growing populations. Despite this, the report said the percentage of population having access to sanitation had increased from 30 percent in 1993 to 35 percent in 2000.

The report said in 1993, 830 million people were deprived of adequate sanitation in South Asia. This increased to 835 million in 2000.

The report urged South Asian countries to follow the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This would eradicate poverty, achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat HIV/AIDS and ensure environment sustainability.

The report urged countries to increase their spending on healthcare services. "With governments only spending one percent of their GDP on health, it is not surprising that the sector has remained so ineffective," it added.