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115 boat people hit by malaria at island camp

By FIONA MACMAHON

AT least 115 Vietnamese boat people from the Hei Ling Chau detention centre are suffering from malaria, and another 100 are believed to have symptoms of the disease.

The 115 cases of malaria were all diagnosed between the beginning of the month and September 25.

The majority have been transferred to Princess Margaret Hospital in the past two days and are generally in satisfactory condition.

There is little danger to the public, as the Department of Health believe all the cases are imported from Vietnam, where malaria is endemic, although the infectious diseases unit of Princess Margaret Hospital has been severely stretched.

The outbreak of malaria comes only weeks after the Vietnamese boat people were moved to Hei Ling Chau from Tai A Chau because of an outbreak of cholera on the barren island.

Malaria is transmitted when victims are bitten by a certain species of mosquitoes, anopholes, but tests carried out by the Regional Services Department on mosquito larvae on Hei Ling Chau have proved negative, an RSD spokesman said.

The island has been treated with larvicidal oiling and residual spraying, he said.

However, when the RSD carried out its disinfection of Tai A Chau it did not test any mosquito larvae to see if there were any anopholes mosquitoes, he said.

The Director of the Department of Health, Dr Lee Shui-hung, said yesterday he believed all the cases were imported from Vietnam, where malaria is endemic. Therefore the risk to the general public was minimal.

A spokesman for the Department of Health said the spread of the disease was not because of bad sanitation in the camp.

He said doctors and nurses had intensified their surveillance program on the island and the situation was being closely monitored.

"All Vietnamese boat people with symptoms of fever, chills and rigour are given a blood examination for presence of malaria parasites," he said.

From the beginning of this year to September 16 a total of 268 cases of malaria have been reported in Hongkong, of which 225 are Vietnamese boat people and the remaining 43 imported cases.

However, the spokesman could not explain why all the boat people had suddenly been stricken at the same time, although there is normally an incubation period of a few months.

The spokesman said it was unlikely that there would be any fatalities. Treatment is normally effective within a few days once the disease has been diagnosed. Malaria can sometimes recur years after the first outbreak.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees local chief of mission

(Cont'd on Page 2, Col 6)

Malaria strikes at island centre

(Cont'd from Page 1)

Mr Robert Van Leeuwen, said that the number of cases seemed to indicate that the situation was serious.

"I assume the Government will take it as such and take the necessary action," he said.

Meanwhile, another 40 Vietnamese boat people sailed into Hongkong yesterday, bringing the total arrivals this month to 1,006, compared to 368 for the whole of September 1988. In all there are now 56,326 Vietnamese in Hongkong.

Malaria control in the territory is concentrated on early case detection and notification, vector control and health education.

All notified malaria

cases are thoroughly investigated and followed up by regional health staff.

This active surveillance program is undertaken to minimise the possibility of a build-up of parasite density in the local community and to ensure that all practicable prevention and treatment programs are being instituted effectively.

The establishment of the Central Reference Laboratory for Malaria also ensures the accurate diagnosis of malaria.

Health education and publicity are maintained to remind the general public to eliminate mosquito breeding sites and to urge picnickers and international travellers to protect themselves against mosquito bites.