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## Don't play politics with lifesaving DDT

By CHRISTOPHER LINGLE  
Special to The Japan Times

NEW DELHI — The specter of malaria, dengue fever and many other mosquito-borne diseases stalk the world. Despite its deserved reputation as being one of the cleanest, pest-free countries in Asia, even Singapore is battling to cope with a rash of dengue cases.

The problem is that many of the pathogens carried by these winged pests have become resistant to drugs. Consequently, malaria and dengue fever are resurgent in many areas of Asia where they had once been under control. This is not merely a regional problem.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), nearly 300 million people are infected with malaria and almost 1.5 million die from it each year. In sub-Saharan Africa, malaria kills one of every 20 children.

But there is a way to fight back that requires putting science before environmentalist ideology. Some public health advocates are promoting the use of the pesticide dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane, or DDT, on the front line in the war against malaria. WHO indicates that more countries are resorting to DDT for malaria control.

After decades of use in support of farming, DDT was banned in the United States in 1972 following claims that it caused harmful effects in fish and wildlife. The ban was influenced by the appearance of Rachel Carson's book "Silent Spring" (1962), wherein she described a fictitious rural community that was wiped out by pesticides.

The obvious implication was that this gruesome outcome would become a tragic reality without a halt to the production and use of pesticides.

Carson's claims that DDT killed off animal life and poisoned humans had a limited scientific foundation, but they were thought credible since she was a "disinterested" critic. Her claim that DDT had cumulative effects in living beings was misleading in that organisms can expel most of the chemical.

For its part, DDT debuted in 1939 as a healthy substitute for other pesticides considered highly toxic. A notable success was in Naples in 1944 when a typhus plague was quickly eliminated.

Before use of DDT began in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), 3 million cases of malaria were recorded there in 1948. The number of reported cases dropped to only 17 by 1963. Then, after DDT use was suspended, the number of malaria cases rose to more than 3,000 in 1967 and to 1 million cases by 1968.



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Use of DDT also boosted overall survivability rates in the Third World. Parasitic and insect threats to the production and storage of food were reduced dramatically. Its use also allowed cultivation of previously undeveloped areas where plant infestation had led to widespread malnutrition.

Yet bans on DDT use remain today even though low doses have not proved dangerous to humans or the environment. Of course, application of massive quantities, as occurred on U.S. cotton farms in the 1950s, can be harmful.

Claims against DDT include that it was endangering the survival of some species of birds. In the U.S., the claim that it was behind the demise of the patriotic symbol of America, the bald eagle, was potent. Later claims included that it was reducing the world's oxygen supply by destroying plant life and that it was a carcinogenic agent and thus contaminating the food chain.

Even so, a special commission named by the U.S. National Academy of Science issued a report in September 1971 stating that "toxicity studies on DDT have provided no indication that the insecticide is unsafe for humans when used in accordance with commonly recognized practice." Nonetheless, DDT was banned in the U.S. by 1972 and, soon thereafter, in much of the world.

DDT can reduce the human costs of malaria as measured by the effects of deaths and ill health. Africa Fighting Malaria, a group in South Africa, estimates that not using DDT costs hundreds of millions of dollars and thousands of lives a year in southern Africa.

Even the claims that DDT lingers in soil for long periods affirms its effectiveness in malaria control. It can repel mosquitoes for long periods after small doses are sprayed on the inside walls of dwellings.

Besides saving lives, using DDT can offset much of the economic damage of malaria. Since the development of projects in tropical areas may be thwarted by threats of malaria, Harvard's Institute for International Development estimates that African countries could be losing up to 1 percent of their domestic economic growth.

Under planned U.N. strictures, DDT would be banned for agricultural uses while resumption of use for malaria control would be allowed. However, there would also be stringent reporting rules. Even simple compliance might pose an unmanageable burden upon health-care professionals in underdeveloped countries. Similarly, these countries may shun DDT rather than risk losing access to some of the nearly \$150 million in annual funds from industrialized countries as a condition for enforcing DDT bans.

It is bad enough that so many leaders in the developing world are unwilling to steer their economies in a way that would let their citizens benefit from globalization. The rest of the world should not add to their misery by forcing them to forgo using a cheap and effective means for improving public health.

Safety and science are not the issues with DDT. In the end, too many decisions by governments concerning the use of alleged toxic substances are political and motivated by ideology.

Objections presented by many environmentalists are part of a wider opposition to technology and economic growth. Countries should not sacrifice citizens' health and the improvement of their living standards to an outmoded view on an effective preventative.

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