

Malaria Kills 21,500 Children

...Veep Boakai Pledges Gov't Support

The United States-based group, the Liberian History, Education and Development, Inc.(LIHIDE),Executive Director, Dr. Syrulwa Somah has revealed that malaria continues to kill nearly 4,500 Liberian children every year.

In the face of the dozens of lives being taken away by malaria yearly, Dr. Somah says millions of dollars are spent buying malaria tablets, mosquito sprays, mosquito coils, and treatment options.

According to him, a 1988-89 report showed that the greatest number of pediatric hospitalization cases was for malaria. In 1984 it was reported that 144 out of 1,000 infants would die before their first birthday and that 220 would die before reaching age five. That is, more than one in every five newborn children dying before reaching age five.

He said studies conducted in Liberia since the early 1950s recorded the seriousness of the malaria crisis in Liberia, yet the country is still confronted with the malaria illness, saying that malaria metric surveys since 1951 have continually revealed at least mesoendemic conditions in Monrovia and hyper endemic conditions in the rest of Liberia

According to Dr. Somah, malaria remains a serious life threatening illness that continues to undermine social and political transformation of Liberia.

In a bid to tackle the deadly killer, Dr. Somah disclosed that a major National Health Symposium on malaria will convene in Monrovia next December and will be expected to bring together over one thousand delegates from Liberia and abroad is aimed at eradicating the malaria menace in Liberia.

Addressing a news conference in Monrovia recently, the LIHIDE Executive Director said his organization in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare through the Ministry's Malaria Control Program, will host a National Health Conference on the eradication of malaria in Liberia in 2006.

In 1988, Dr. Somah said research found that one half of the population of Liberia was infected with the malaria parasite, including one third of all infants and over one-half of all children. "Other studies have indicated that in Monrovia and its suburbs; at least one third of the population carries the malaria disease, including one fourth of all infants and more than one third of young children. This means that even non-infected mosquitoes have a 1 in 3 chance of picking up malaria parasites and infecting the next person they bite."

Similarly, a nationwide children's health survey, conducted between February and July of 1986, found that one of every two children had had fever during the four-week period prior to the survey, Dr. Somah noted but said in 67% of the cases, the child was between twelve and seventeen months old.

According to him, majority of the Liberian people need to know that malaria can be eradicated without heavy reliance on mosquito coils, local herbs, chloroquine tablets, and other malaria treatment options currently available to the public.

"I strongly believe that the Liberian press can play a pivotal role in educating our people on the social, economic, and political impact of malaria by being the vessel through which to raise awareness about the negative impact of malaria on our people. If we want for Liberia to be

developed, then Liberian journalists must be the ones to spearhead and articulate vision that meaningful development is possible in Liberia regardless of our current economic, political, and social conditions.”

Besides, he said malaria continues to destroy the Liberian economy and exacerbate poverty because a large portion of our resources are used (about \$40 million annually) for prevention and control, adding that malaria also impacts the Liberian economy at several levels, including household incomes, community welfare, private sector development, and productivity in government service.

Dr. Somah said government resources continue to come under increased pressure in providing malaria treatments and related health services at government health centers, while the private sector continues to suffer reduced investment growth and profit losses.

“The direct economic costs of malaria prevention and treatment at the household level are the main causes of poverty in Liberia, considering that an employee earns between \$150 and \$200 a month, and he or she has a spouse and two or more children who must buy mosquito spray or coils for 30 days and visit the doctor for treatment regularly.”

He said the time has come for Liberians to take initiatives and responsibilities for their own development without relying solely on our friends. He urged members of the press to begin to spread the news about eradicating malaria in Liberia by being active participants in educating the public about the pending National Health Conference in December.

Meanwhile, Dr. Somah who has held talks with stakeholders, government officials and other partners has revealed that US\$28 million is needed for the malaria eradication program. Thousands of Liberians, stakeholders and foreign residents have applauded LIHIDE for the initiative to eradicate malaria from Liberia.

They made the commendations during separate radio talks shows on Radio Veritas, Liberia Broadcasting System and Star Radio when LIHIDE boss, Dr. Somah appeared to brief the nation on the undertaking by LIHIDE to eradicate the deadly malaria virus from the country. The callers urged the government to support LIHIDE if malaria is to be eradicated.

Meanwhile, in an effort to combat malaria in Liberia, the Executive Director of Liberian History, Education & Development, Inc. (LIHEDE) is continuing the path of discussion with the President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and other organizations after holding earlier talks with the past interim government of Liberia, headed by Charles Gyude Bryant.

Dr. Syrulwa Somah told this paper that the Vice President of Liberia, Joseph Boakai has assured LIHEDE of his full support in the malaria eradication campaign. He said the Vice President along with some Ministers of the government have pledged to do all in their power to eradicate this disease that is taking the lives of the citizens.

He said these officials of government have admitted that they are victims of the disease. LIHEDE Executive Director in the quest to eradicate malaria from Liberia met with several personalities and stakeholders including the Liberian media.

Prominent among those Dr. Somah called on include the Minister of Health and Social Welfare, Dr. Walter Gwenigale; Minister of Information, Johnny McClain; Labor Minister Samuel Kofi Woods and the Solicitor General of Liberia, Cllr. Tiawan S. Gongloe as well as the Minister of Youth, Sports, Cllr. Jamesetta Howard Wolokollie and Deputy Minister of Gender and Development Lopu Kandaikai.

He also met executives and staffers of CEDE, Miss Liberia and Miss Africa. He also held talks with LIHIDE Liberia branch staffers.

He said Liberians in the United States will be coming in mass for the malaria conference in December, and as such, he has asked the Information Ministry to provide the National Culture Troop an outstanding welcome.

Dr Somah indicated that he held talks with the German Ambassador who he said is willing to support the malaria eradication campaign. He said the German Ambassador stressed his country's participation in the post war rebuilding of Liberia.

Dr. Somah revealed that the campaign of malaria eradication was also taken to the various churches and mosques in the country.

He said religious leaders have a responsibility to also inform their congregations and mosques on the danger of malaria. LIHEDE boss also appeared on several Talk Shows aired on various radio stations including the Liberia Broadcasting System (LBS) Radio Veritas, Star Radio and UNMIL Radio, while he also conducted a major news conference which was attended by over 15 print and electronic media institutions and met with the Press Union of Liberia.