

Dozens of high fever deaths cause panic in northern India

Indian health authorities are rushing medical supplies to north Indian towns and villages where at least 50 people have died from fever over the past two weeks, topping the number of fever-related deaths over a three-month period last year.

Patients suffering from fever and bouts of shivering crowded hospitals in the Rohilkhand region on Thursday, according to Dr Vineet Shukla, a senior Uttar Pradesh (UP) state health official in Bareilly, 250 kilometres southwest of Lucknow, the state capital. Bareilly's district hospital has received more than 1,500 patients since Aug 30.

"We do not have enough beds to keep them," Shukla said.

UP Health Minister Sidharth Nath Singh said patients were testing positive for malaria and viral infection, a usually non-fatal sickness that causes coughing and colds.

The state's head medical doctor, Padmakar Singh, said makeshift clinics equipped with malaria kits were being set up in villages where people had been reported sick. Mosquito control vehicles were also deployed to spray insecticide.

Mahendra Lal, head of the village of Hasanpur in Bareilly, said more than two out of three people in the village of 300 residents had fallen ill. He said those who could have travelled to nearby cities for treatment in private hospitals.

Mohammed Sadiq, a resident of Hasanpur, said his wife died from fever last week.

"I lost my wife because I stayed back with a hope that doctors will come and give treatment. She would have been alive today if I too had moved out to some big city," he said.

More than 200 million people live in impoverished UP, India's most populous state. Thousands of people suffer from encephalitis, malaria, typhoid and other mosquito-borne diseases each year during the summer monsoon. Viral infections are also common.

Health authorities said there were 47 fever-related deaths during a three-month period starting at the end of July last year.

Singh, the state's health minister, said heavier than average rains had likely contributed to this year's outbreak.

He blamed a lack of coordination among health officials in Bareilly, the centre of the outbreak, for "allowing the situation to go out of hand".

Mehtab Alam of the Raza Husain Memorial Charitable Society said the actual death toll over the past two weeks may be far higher than government estimates. Alam said the government's count did not include deaths in private hospitals or in villages where sick people had not sought medical help.

"You can find patients in every village," Alam said, adding that: "they get initial treatment from quacks but once the condition deteriorates they are rushed to government hospitals. By that time it is too late."