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HEADLINE: Doctors warn of deaths from heat waves, malaria, other ills

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Global warming may threaten more than the climate in the 21st century, international medical experts said today. It may also kill - through heat waves, violent weather and the spread of tropical disease.

"Political leaders and policy-makers generally do not understand these consequences," said Dr. Eric Chivian, a Harvard University environmental health specialist.

Chivian led a group of doctors from the United States, Russia, Brazil and Japan to the 150-nation talks here over strengthening the 1992 Climate Change Treaty to cut back emissions of carbon dioxide and other fossil-fuel byproducts linked to global warming.

A U.N. scientific network has concluded global average temperatures could rise by up to 6 degrees by 2100, touching off major climate disturbances, if emissions continue to increase at present rates.

The U.N. scientists have identified various public health threats:

- Increased illnesses and deaths from heat waves, especially in urban areas and among the elderly.
- Increased injuries and deaths from violent storms, floods and other weather-related events.
- Greater spread of infectious diseases carried by mosquitoes, including malaria and dengue fever.
- Decreased availability of drinking water, because of drought, flooding and seas whose levels would rise from heat expansion.

Harvard's Dr. Paul R. Epstein identified the spread of malaria as a particular peril, one that apparently has already struck because of changing climate.

"Malaria is now occurring high in the mountains of central Africa and in the highlands of Papua New Guinea," Epstein told reporters. "This is exactly in the same areas where glaciers are retreating and plants are migrating up mountains."

Malarial mosquitoes are highly sensitive to warmth, generally ranging only where winter temperatures are no lower than 61 degrees. Epstein said some areas where malaria has newly appeared have witnessed temperature rises of 2 degrees since 1970.

The doctors urged governments to take decisive steps at the Kyoto conference to reduce fuel emissions by industrial nations.

Although scientific uncertainties remain about the extent and impact of global warming in the 21st century, Chivian said, from a medical point of view the world cannot wait.

"The principle of prevention is central to the practice of medicine," he said. "If you wait for all the information to come in, it may be too late for the patient."

Chivian is director and Epstein associate director of the Harvard Medical School's Center for Health and the Global Environment.