

WORLD HEALTH  
ORGANIZATION



REGIONAL OFFICE FOR  
SOUTH EAST ASIA

REGIONAL COMMITTEE

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Provisional Agenda item 10

INTERNATIONAL SANITARY REGULATIONS:  
QUARANTINE PROCEDURES FOR INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL  
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THREE EPIDEMIC DISEASES  
OF SOUTH-EAST ASIA - CHOLERA, SMALLPOX AND PLAGUE

(Paper presented by the Government of the Union of Burma)

REGIONAL COMMITTEE DOCUMENT

With general global improvements in health status and international co-operation in quarantine measures, the spread of communicable diseases through international travel has been declining gradually. Through the WHO epidemiological intelligence service, information regarding epidemic diseases has been disseminated in good time. Many Western countries begin to feel it safe to rely on these procedures and relax certain provisions of the International Sanitary Regulations. The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) shares this view and hopes to compromise some requirements of the International Sanitary Regulations. Even WHO Headquarters in Geneva seems to endorse these complacent views in many instances. WHO's Quarantine Section, for example, enquires whether the Government of the Union of Burma exceeds the provisions of the Regulations in demanding valid cholera certificates from all incoming passengers irrespective of their source of travel. Burma has replied that, on the basis of the local situation, it is deemed necessary for such action, even if it exceeds the provisions of the International Quarantine Regulations.

Since South-East Asia is the home of many epidemic diseases and especially of cholera, smallpox and plague, it might be worthwhile to consider improving the provisions of the International Sanitary Regulations, and not to think about relaxation. Two aspects of the shortcomings of the Regulations may be quoted, to illustrate the need for improvement:

It is customary for people in this region to carry food during travel, either for personal consumption or as gifts. Action taken on such food is limited to infected persons or infected aircraft or ships. Under the International Sanitary Regulations, practically nothing can be done about food sent by freight. There is always the risk of spread of infectious diseases internationally by this means - especially of cholera through fresh fruits and food, and of plague through grains and cereals.

The second point is regarding carriers - cholera carriers in particular. The case of a cholera carrier being discovered among the crew on board the S.S. President Quirine - Yokohama may be cited, to illustrate this point. That case could not be considered infected nor could the ship be declared infected, since a cholera carrier as such cannot be considered as infected under the provisions of the International Sanitary Regulations. Thus many carriers can remain undetected, and the potential danger from this source could be serious.

The source of the cholera outbreak in Burma in 1962 cannot be detected with certainty. The causal organism of this epidemic, however, is cholera El Tor - detected for the first time in Burma. Considering the fact that the first case occurred on an island while it was being visited by foreign sailors, the epidemic is assumed to have been imported by a foreign ship which, according to the International Sanitary Regulations, was registered as healthy in the records.