

## Millions of women, infant deaths easily avoidable

The deaths of millions of women and infants could easily be prevented by more widely adopting simple practices like hand-washing and immunisations, a World Health Organisation report said last Tuesday.

The study estimated that 300,000 to 500,000 women die in childbirth each year, while 3.6 million newborns do not survive their first month and an additional 5.2 million children die before their fifth birthday. Some 82 per cent of those deaths occur in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, according to the report published by the WHO's Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health. The study was released ahead of a meeting Wednesday at the United Nations to develop an action plan to reduce maternal and child deaths. "This is not high tech," said Joy Lawn of Save the Children's Saving Newborn Lives programme and a member of the scientific and advocacy group Countdown to 2015, which helped prepare the report. "Up to three million newborns each year can be saved with simple approaches, like cutting the (umbilical) cord with a clean blade... or antibiotics to treat infections." The study called for an additional \$16 billion to help expand global access to family planning methods and pre and post-natal care, as well as to hire millions of health care and community workers. The investment would save the lives of up to a million women, 4.5 million newborns and 6.5 million children by 2015, the study found. "This is a multi-layered problem that can be addressed with a combination of many, very simple interventions," said Flavia Bustreo, director of The Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health. The report comes a day after The Lancet published a study that found a 35 per cent drop in maternal deaths in 181 countries between 1980 and 2008. It found that more than 50 per cent of maternal deaths in childbirth in 2008 occurred in just six countries: India, Afghanistan, Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Some 135 countries have child mortality rates of less than 40 per 1,000 live births or are on target to meet the UN Millennium Development Goal of a two-thirds reduction by 2015, according to UNICEF. But 39 countries are showing insufficient progress and 18 show no progress or a worsening of child mortality. While poverty plays a major role, the report also points to a number of other reasons for high maternal and infant mortality rates in some countries. These deaths result from causes essentially unknown in the developed world, such as infections, preterm birth, obstructed labour and unsafe abortions. Malaria and HIV/AIDS are also major causes in some countries. The bulk of these deaths could be prevented with maternal and neonatal care programmes and better hygiene practices, the report said. In some regions, cultural traditions increase the risk, such as in parts of rural South Asia where childbirth is considered "dirty" and women must deliver their babies in cowsheds and stay there for a month. - AFP