



CHINA'S ANIMAL TRADE RISKS MORE OUTBREAKS

The animal-borne SARS virus 17 years ago was supposed to be a wake-up call about consuming wildlife as food, but scientists say China's latest epidemic indicates that the practice remains widespread and a growing risk to human health.

Like SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), which was traced to bats and civets, the virus that has killed dozens in China and infected almost 2,000 people is believed to have originated in animals trafficked for food.

Final findings are yet to be announced, but Chinese health officials believe it came from wildlife sold illegally at a meat market in the central city of Wuhan that offered everything from rats to wolf puppies and giant salamanders.

The so-called "bushmeat" trade, plus broader human encroachment on wild habitats, is bringing us into ever-closer contact with animal viruses that can spread rapidly in our uber-connected world, said Peter Daszak, president of EcoHealth Alliance, a global NGO focused on infectious disease prevention.

The Global Virome Project, a worldwide effort to increase preparedness for pandemics, which Daszak is a part of, estimates there are 1.7 million undiscovered viruses in wildlife, nearly half of which could be harmful to humans.

Daszak said the project's research indicates we can expect around five new animal-borne pathogens to infect humanity each year. "The new normal is that pandemics are going to happen more frequently," he said.

"We are making contact with animals that carry these viruses more, and more, and more." Viruses are a natural part of the environment, and not all are the stuff of sci-fi horror.

But the recent track record of animal-hosted viruses that "jump" to humans is sobering. Like SARS, which killed hundreds in China and Hong Kong in 2002-03, Ebola also was traced to bats, while HIV has roots in African primates.

Today, more than 60 percent of new emerging human infectious diseases reach us via animals, scientists say. Even familiar menu items like poultry and cattle -- whose pathogens we have largely adapted to over millennia -- occasionally throw a curveball, like bird flu or mad-cow disease.

China yesterday banned all trade in wildlife until the emergency is over, but conservationists complain that China has previously failed to deliver on pledges to get tough.

Environmental groups say Chinese demand, fuelled by rising consumer buying power, is the biggest driver of the global bushmeat trade today.

Some rare species have been prized in China as delicacies or for unproved health benefits since ancient times. But the trend is changing. Recent surveys strongly indicate that China's younger generation -- swayed partly by animal-rights campaigns involving popular Chinese celebrities -- are much less inclined to tuck into bat, rat, or salamander, he added.

"I think that in 50 years this will be a thing of the past," Daszak said. "The problem is that we live in such an interconnected world today that any pandemic like this can spread globally in three weeks."

SOURCE: AFP

Judging the gravity of the outbreak

AFP, Paris

How serious is the coronavirus outbreak? What are its symptoms and how contagious is it? Experts studying the new virus, still have key questions to answer before they can assess its danger.

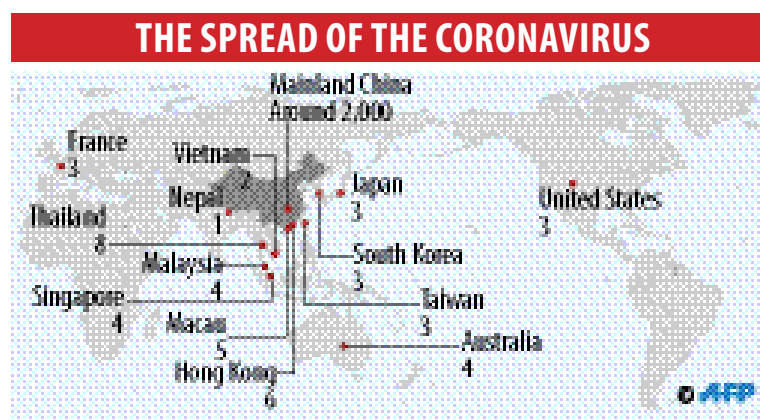
As of Sunday, nearly 2,000 cases have been confirmed in China, its country of origin, of which 56 have been fatal. Several cases have been detected in Asian countries, as well as a few in Australia, France, Canada and the United States.

So far, no-one outside China has died. We know how many people have died from the virus, but not the true numbers infected.

The symptoms are hard to differentiate from viral flu, making detection of it harder

The mortality rate of new coronavirus is less than 5 percent compared to 9.5 percent of SARS and 34.5 percent of MERS

The incubation rate for the new virus is thought to be a maximum of two weeks.



2019-nCoV, as it has been named, is part of the coronavirus virus family, the source of two previous fatal epidemics.

The 2002/03 SARS outbreak (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) started in Beijing and killed 774 people out of a total 8,096 infected. The 2012 MERS outbreak (Middle East respiratory syndrome) killed 858 people out of the 2,494 infected.

So those outbreaks had significantly different mortality rates of 9.5 percent and 34.5 percent respectively. For the moment, the mortality rate of the new coronavirus is less than five percent. Chinese scientists reported in

The Lancet Friday that, based on a study of 41 early-detected cases, some of the new virus's symptoms resemble those of SARS. All patients had pneumonia, most had a fever, three-quarters of them were coughing and more than half had trouble breathing.

Despite this, lead author Bin Lao added: "there are some important differences", such as a no runny noses, sneezing or sore throats. Nor did the new virus cause stomach problems such as diarrhoea, which hit 20-25 percent of SARS patients. The average age of the 41 patients studied was 49.

All this gives us a preliminary

sketch of the new virus, even if one has to be cautious about drawing conclusions based on such a small sample. The study is all the more important because a current epidemic of flu, which has similar symptoms, has made isolating patients of the new virus difficult.

The incubation rate for the new virus is thought to be a maximum of two weeks.

Researchers think the new virus probably came from bats, as the SARS virus did, with which it shares 80 percent of its genetic makeup.

But we still don't know which animal passed it on to humans. On Wednesday, a Chinese team suggested it could be a snake, but that was immediately challenged by other experts, who think a mammal is the more likely culprit.

Identifying which animal it was could help fight the outbreak.

Precautions: Health authorities and scientists say the same precautions against other viral illnesses can be used: wash your hands frequently, cover up your coughs, try not to touch your face. And anyone who does come down with the virus should be placed in isolation.



A DRDO anti-satellite weapons (ASAT) 'Mission Shakti' (front) is being marched past along Rajpath during the Republic Day parade in New Delhi, yesterday. Inset, Schoolchildren dance on Rajpath during the parade. Huge crowds gathered for India's Republic Day parade yesterday, with women taking centre-stage at the annual pomp-filled spectacle of military might featuring army tanks, horses and camels. PHOTO: AFP

Philippines lowers volcano alert

AFP, Manila

An explosive eruption of the Philippines' restive Taal volcano no longer appears imminent, authorities said yesterday as they lifted most of a mass evacuation order but warned residents to remain ready to flee. Warning signs like earthquakes have been steadily waning since Taal burst to life two weeks ago with plumes of ash and lava, forcing over 135,000 people into shelters over fears a massive blast was coming. No one is known to have died in the eruption.

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Brazil rainstorms kill at least 30

AFP, Brasilia

At least 30 people have been killed in two days of intense storms in southeastern Brazil, the Minas Gerais state Civil Defense office said Saturday. Seventeen people are also missing, seven injured, and some 3,500 have been forced out of their homes following a series of landslides and building collapses, Civil Defense officials said. Most of the victims were killed in landslides or buried in destroyed homes. At least two children were listed among the dead.

Warren wins coveted Iowa endorsement

REUTERS, Muscatine

The Des Moines Register newspaper endorsed Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren in the crowded race for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination late on Saturday, a coveted show of support that could boost her campaign in the state's first-in-the-nation caucus on Feb. 3. Iowa's caucuses are the first nominating contests in presidential election cycles, giving the largely rural, Midwestern state an outsized role in choosing standard-bearers from each party.

Divided by hatred, united by poetry

Rohingya refugee writers join 'Poetry for Humanity' event in Yangon

AFP, Yangon

Divided by hatred but united over the written word, Rohingya Muslim poets in Bangladeshi refugee camps joined Buddhist bards in Myanmar by video link as part of a groundbreaking poetry festival in a country reeling from genocide allegations.

Five Rohingya writers took part in the three-day "Poetry for Humanity" event in Yangon, with three speaking live by video link to a packed room while two had sent pre-recorded readings, fearing their stuttering connection would not hold up.

They drew applause for verses on the bloodshed that forced hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas to flee their homes in northern Rakhine state -- and also for their resilience.

"My words are taller than the walls put between Buddhists and Muslims. My words are stronger than the hatred designed for me," reads one verse from writer Mayyu Ali's poem "My Words".

He fled with his family to the Bangladeshi camps where he has helped bring together a group of around 150 refugees sharing a passion for poetry.

"I want to show Burmese people that the Rohingyas are also Burmese. We also love Myanmar," the 27-year-old told AFP.



Poets once vexed Myanmar's censorship-obsessed former military junta.

Now younger writers are keeping the art form alive as a form of dissent under the civilian government of Aung San Suu Kyi, which has defended the crackdown against the Rohingyas.

The festival came in a week of heightened sensitivity over the crisis. The International Court of Justice ruled Thursday there was enough evidence to pursue allegations that Myanmar committed genocide against the Rohingyas, and ordered the country to comply with urgent measures to protect the minority.

Some 740,000 fled over the border to escape a bloody military crackdown in 2017 that is thought to have killed thousands.

Yet the minority evoke little sympathy in Buddhist-majority Myanmar, where even the word "Rohingya" is taboo.

Festival organiser Maung Saungka, who was jailed for six months in 2016 for writing a poem deemed defamatory to the former president, says acknowledging the word "Rohingya" is a first step towards preventing more human rights abuses.

"We hope people will learn about equal rights and about treating different people in a humane way."

IMPEACHMENT TRIAL

'Get rid of her'

Trump reportedly called for removal of Ukraine envoy

AFP, Washington

Donald Trump demanded the dismissal of Marie Yovanovitch, the ambassador to Ukraine and a key figure in the president's impeachment trial, according to a video recording released to US media on Saturday.

The footage was reportedly taken during an April 2018 donor dinner at a hotel and released to news outlets by an attorney for Lev Parnas, an indicted associate of Trump's personal attorney Rudy Giuliani.

Parnas and his business partner Igor Fruman are key players in Trump's alleged campaign to pressure the government of Ukraine to dig up dirt on Joe Biden, a potential election opponent for the president. The issue is central to Trump's ongoing impeachment trial in the US Senate.

His order to fire the ambassador came after Parnas told her that Yovanovitch was an impediment, and claiming that she had privately disparaged the president.

"Get rid of her!" Trump says on the tape, reportedly addressing a White House aide at the dining table. "Get her out tomorrow. I don't care. Get her out tomorrow. Take her out. OK? Do it."

In interview with MSNBC News last week, Parnas said Trump "knew exactly what was going on" with his and Fruman's efforts to pressure Ukrainian authorities to investigate Biden.



Turkey quake toll hits 31

The death toll from a powerful earthquake which struck eastern Turkey rose to 31, officials said yesterday, as rescue efforts continued. The magnitude 6.8 quake hit on Friday evening, with its epicentre in the small lakeside town of Sivrice in Elazig province but also affected neighbouring cities and countries. The Turkish government's disaster and emergency management agency (AFAD) 1,607 were injured. Nearly 80 buildings collapsed while 645 were heavily damaged in Elazig and Malatya, the agency said in a statement.

US won't lift sanctions to negotiate with Iran: Trump

The United States will not lift sanctions on Iran in order to negotiate, US President Donald Trump tweeted late on Saturday, seemingly in response to a Der Spiegel interview with Iran's foreign minister. "Iranian Foreign Minister says Iran wants to negotiate with The United States, but wants sanctions removed. @FoxNews @OANN No Thanks!" Trump tweeted in English on Saturday and later in Farsi. Tensions between Iran and the United States have reached the highest levels in decades after the US killed top Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in a drone strike in Baghdad on Jan 3.

5 blasts rock Assam districts



Suspected extremists yesterday carried out five blasts in three eastern Assam districts morning amid heightened security for Republic Day. Police said there was no casualty and the low-intensity blasts caused minimal damage. Two of the blasts took place near a hospital and a Gurudwara in Dibrugarh town. Another blast occurred at Dujajan in Dibrugarh district when two motorcycle-borne men lobbed a grenade. Banned United Liberation Front of Asom-Independent (ULFA-I) claimed responsibility for the blasts. The ULFA-I has exploded bombs and grenades during Republic Day and Independence Day celebrations in the past. The deadliest of these was on August 15, 2004, when 18 people were killed in north-eastern Assam's Dhemaji town. SOURCE: AFP



Anti-government protesters stand atop and by a burnt police vehicle following clashes with security forces in the city of Nasiriyah in Iraq's southern Dhi Qar province, yesterday. Security forces shot live rounds to clear protest hotspots in Baghdad and southern Iraq for a second day yesterday, sparking skirmishes with demonstrators determined to keep up their movement. PHOTO: AFP

CAA to create largest statelessness crisis

Predicts draft EU resolution

NDTV ONLINE

More than 150 lawmakers of the European Union have drafted a five-page resolution against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), contending that it "marks a dangerous shift in the way citizenship will be determined in India and is set to create the largest statelessness crisis in the world and cause immense human suffering".

Accusing the government of "discriminating against, harassing and prosecuting national and religious minorities and silencing any opposition, human rights groups... and journalists critical of the government", they asked the EU to insist on a "strong human rights clause with an effective implementation and suspension mechanism" during any trade agreement.

The resolution -- which is expected to be tabled during the plenary session of the European Parliament starting in Brussels next week -- comes days after the Economist Intelligence Unit ranked India 10 places lower in the Democracy Index, mentioning the citizenship law and the restrictions in Jammu and Kashmir after the government ended its special status.

The lawmakers expressed solidarity with the January 7 protests and asked the government to stop criminalising the protests and negotiate with the protesters.

In the resolution, the lawmakers expressed "deep concern" that India has "created the legal grounds to strip millions of Muslims of the fundamental right of equal access to citizenship; is concerned that the CAA could be used, along with the National Register of Citizens, to render many Muslim citizens stateless".