

Biodiversity may help slow disease spread: Experts

REUTERS, Oslo

Better protection for the diversity of the planet's creatures and plants could help shield humans from diseases like AIDS, Ebola or bird flu and save billions of dollars in health care costs, researchers said on Tuesday.

They said human disruptions to biodiversity -- from roads through the Amazon jungle to deforestation in remote parts of Africa -- had made people more exposed to new diseases that originate in wildlife.

"Biodiversity not only stores the promise of new medical treatments and cures, it buffers humans from organisms and agents that cause disease," scientists from the Diversitas international group said in a statement.

"Preventing emerging diseases through biodiversity conservation is far more cost effective than developing vaccines to combat them later," it said ahead of a November 9-10 conference of 700 biodiversity experts in Oaxaca, Mexico.

Peter Daszak, a scientist who helped find links between Asian bats and the

virus, said the 2003 outbreak of the flu-like disease cost about \$50 billion, largely because it cut travel and trade from Asia. About 800 people died.

And AIDS, widely believed to have originated in chimpanzees, killed an estimated 3.1 million people in 2004 and the United Nations estimates that

\$15 billion will be needed for prevention, treatment and care in 2006 alone.

"Emerging diseases are causing a crisis of public health," Daszak, executive director of the consortium for conservation medicine at the Wildlife Trust, New York, told Reuters.

WILDLIFETO PEOPLE

Diversitas experts urged governments to work out policies to protect biodiversity, including tougher regulations on trade, agriculture and travel to reduce chances that diseases like avian flu can jump from wildlife to people.

"We're not saying that we should lock up nature and throw away the key," said Charles Perrings, a biodiversity expert at Arizona State University. But he said humans should be more careful about disrupting areas of rich biodiversity.

He said diseases had spread from wildlife to humans throughout history but the risks were rising because of the impact of growing human populations on habitats.

The experts said the preservation of a wider range of species could also ease the impact of disease.

A factor helping the spread of Lyme disease in the eastern United States, for instance, was the absence of former predators like wolves or wild cats that once kept down numbers of white-footed mice -- a reservoir of the infection.

Lyme disease was also less of a problem for humans in US states

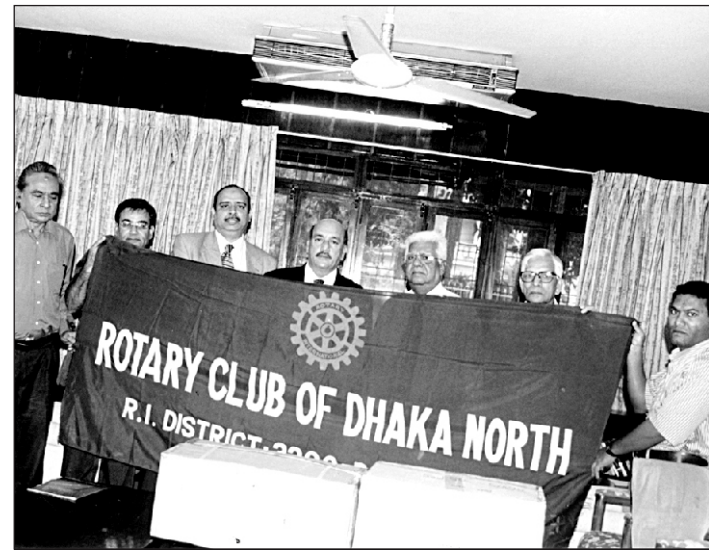
where the ticks that transmit the disease had more potential targets, like lizards or small mammals.

"The value of services provided by nature and its diversity is under-appreciated until they stop," said Anne Larigauderie, executive director of Paris-based Diversitas, a non-government organisation.

She said China had to employ people in some regions to pollinate apple orchards because the over-use of

pesticides had killed off bees. "It maybe takes 10 people to do the work of two beehives," she told Reuters.

And the Australian gastric brooding frog had once been seen as key for anti-ulcer drugs because it bizarrely incubated its young in its stomach after shutting off digestive acids. It has since become extinct, taking its secrets with it.



Rotary Club of Dhaka North hands over warm clothes to Pakistan High Commissioner Alamgir Babar for the earthquake victims recently.



PHOTO: STAR

Deputy Minister for Industries Abdus Salam Pintu speaks at a discussion and iftar party at a city restaurant yesterday. Bhuapur Upazila Kalyan Samity Dhaka organised the event.

WFP sends biscuits for Pak quake victims

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

World Food Programme in Bangladesh is dispatching 200 metric tons of High Energy Biscuits to meet immediate nutritional needs of the earthquake victims in Pakistan.

WFP-chartered aircraft started flying the biscuits on Tuesday from Dhaka to Peshawar in northern Pakistan, said a

press release yesterday.

"We are very happy to be able to contribute to the critical relief operations in Pakistan," said Edward Kallon, WFP Bangladesh Deputy Country Director.

"The response to this disaster has transcended boundaries of all sorts, and we hope that our contribution will be helpful for the earthquake survivors," he added.

"With the support of the Government of Bangladesh, WFP has been able to quickly organise and airlift these biscuits for distribution among the earthquake victims," said Kallon.

He observed that the ready-to-eat biscuits are ideal for use in disasters where water supplies and other infrastructure are disrupted.

Transport of the biscuits to Peshawar will continue for next three days. The biscuits, which are easily transportable, are intended to meet immediate nutritional needs in some of the hardest-to-reach and worst-affected areas of Pakistan.

The High Energy Biscuits have been released from WFP's existing stocks in Bangladesh that are used for school feeding programmes in the country.

The biscuits, which are produced in Bangladesh, will be replaced through new production without causing any disruption of WFP's school feeding programmes.

CU BCL calls off strike

CU CORRESPONDENT

Chittagong University (CU) unit of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) yesterday withdrew its strike enforced on Tuesday.

BCL President Kazi Mazharul Islam said they withdrew the strike following an assurance by the CU authorities at a meeting at VC office in the afternoon to meet their demands.

The BCL announced a three-day strike demanding arrest of the culprits involved in an incident of insulting the effigy of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on October 16, withdrawal of the increased price of admission form and renovation of the connecting road no 1 from Chittagong-Rangamati highway to university campus.

The second day strike forced suspension of classes at the university.

However, all scheduled examinations were held.