

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

April 8, 2020

Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus
Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO)
WHO Headquarters
Avenue Appia 20
1211 Geneva, Switzerland

Ms. Monique Eloit
Director-General, World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE)
OIE Headquarters
12 rue de Prony
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Qu Dongyu
Director-General, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
FAO Headquarters
Viale delle Terme di Caracalla
00153 Rome, Italy

Dear Directors General,

In order to help prevent the next pandemic, we write today to urge your organizations to take aggressive action toward a global shut down of live wildlife markets and a ban on the international trade of live wildlife that is not intended for conservation purposes. Live wildlife markets, known as “wet” markets, were linked to the 2003 SARS outbreak and are believed to be the source of the current COVID-19. As this pandemic continues to threaten the lives of millions, pushes healthcare systems to the breaking point, and devastates economies around the world, it is imperative that we all take action as a global community to protect public health.

Scientists studying zoonotic diseases – diseases that jump between animals and humans – have pointed to the close proximity of shoppers, vendors, and both live and dead animals at wildlife markets in countries around the world as prime transmission locations for these pathogens. The stress of transport and holding wild animals in these crowded markets where they are also sometimes slaughtered creates an unnatural environment where viruses from different species are able to come in contact, mutate, and spread from one species to another. The viruses can subsequently spread or “spill over” into humans through handling and consumption of wildlife, potentially starting highly contagious outbreaks of new and deadly diseases for which we have no natural immunity -- as we are currently seeing with COVID-19 and have seen with SARS, Ebola, monkeypox and Lassa fever in the recent past.

“Wet” markets in particular pose a threat to global public health because wildlife comes from many different locations without any standardized sanitary or health inspection processes. Market vendors cage animals of different species in close proximity, where the animals are likely to urinate, defecate and potentially bleed or salivate on the animals below them. The risk to food buyers can also be through the slaughter of animals in front of customers, releasing disease carrying fluids like blood, saliva, and excrement into the air, which can then splash or splatter on nearby people, be consumed or inadvertently inhaled by humans.

Scientists estimate that approximately 60-75% of emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic and that approximately 72% originate from wildlife. Scientists also estimate that the majority of all future emerging infectious diseases will be zoonotic in nature, and zoonotic diseases are the ecological source for a long history of infectious diseases. For example, in the past 45 years, at least five pandemics have been traced back to bats. Ebola, which has killed 13,500 people in multiple outbreaks since 1976, Middle Eastern respiratory syndrome, better known as MERS, which can be found in 28 countries, and the Nipah virus, which has a 78% fatality rate, all originated in bats. In the case of SARS and the COVID-19 outbreak, bats were also the original hosts. Bats then infected other animals, who infected humans. In the case of HIV, a virus originally developed in chimpanzees and spread to humans when humans hunted these chimpanzees for meat and came into contact with their infected blood.

It is clear that to protect human health, these close and sustained interactions with wildlife must stop. While China has banned the trade and consumption of wild animals in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, there are significant loopholes relating to the current legal trade of wildlife for medicinal purposes. China took similar steps after the 2003 SARS outbreak, but ultimately lifted the restrictions after the outbreak came under control and perceived risk decreased.

As leaders of organizations tasked with ensuring human and animal health, we urge you to work with member states to ensure that live wildlife markets are closed permanently in all countries and that the international trade of live wildlife not intended for conservation purposes is banned.

We thank you for your attention to this issue.

Sincerely,

/s/ Cory A. Booker

United States Senator

/s/ Lindsey O. Graham

United States Senator

/s/ Mike Quigley

United States Representative

/s/ Michael McCaul

United States Representative

/s/ Patrick Leahy

United States Senator

/s/ Kevin Cramer

United States Senator

/s/ Chris Van Hollen

United States Senator

/s/ Thom Tillis

United States Senator

/s/ Christopher A. Coons

United States Senator

/s/ Martha McSally

United States Senator

/s/ Jeffrey A. Merkley

United States Senator

/s/ Cindy Hyde-Smith

United States Senator

/s/ Jeanne Shaheen

United States Senator

/s/ Marco Rubio

United States Senator

/s/ Gary C. Peters

United States Senator

/s/ Richard Burr

United States Senator

/s/ Sheldon Whitehouse

United States Senator

/s/ David A. Perdue

United States Senator

/s/ Richard J. Durbin

United States Senator

/s/ Cory Gardner

United States Senator

/s/ Tom Udall

United States Senator

/s/ Marsha Blackburn

United States Senator

/s/ Martin Heinrich

United States Senator

/s/ Dianne Feinstein

United States Senator

/s/ Brian Fitzpatrick

United States Representative

/s/ Ann McLane Kuster

United States Representative

/s/ Marcy Kaptur

United States Representative

/s/ Nanette Diaz Barragán

United States Representative

/s/ Donna E. Shalala

United States Representative

/s/ Raul Grijalva

United States Representative

/s/ Matt Gaetz

United States Representative

/s/ Jesús G. García

United States Representative

/s/ James P. McGovern

United States Representative

/s/ Darren Soto

United States Representative

/s/ Jan Schakowsky

United States Representative

/s/ Bill Posey

United States Representative

/s/ Joe Neguse

United States Representative

/s/ Steve Cohen

United States Representative

/s/ Fred Upton

United States Representative

/s/ Grace Napolitano

United States Representative

/s/ Bill Foster

United States Representative

/s/ Earl Blumenauer

United States Representative

/s/ Sean Casten

United States Representative

/s/ Jerry McNerney

United States Representative

/s/ Steve Chabot

United States Representative

/s/ Pete Aguilar

United States Representative

/s/ Bill Pascrell Jr.

United States Representative

/s/ Donald M. Payne Jr.

United States Representative

/s/ Betty McCollum

United States Representative

/s/ Lizzie Fletcher

United States Representative

/s/ Raja Krishnamoorthi

United States Representative

/s/ Chrissy Houlahan

United States Representative

/s/ Abigail D. Spanberger

United States Representative

/s/ TJ Cox

United States Representative

/s/ Eleanor Holmes Norton

United States Representative

/s/ Gerald E. Connolly

United States Representative

/s/ Mike Gallagher

United States Representative

/s/ Debbie Dingell

United States Representative

/s/ Daniel W. Lipinski

United States Representative

/s/ Christopher H. Smith

United States Representative

/s/ John Katko

United States Representative

/s/ J. Luis Correa

United States Representative

/s/ Jaime Raskin

United States Representative

/s/ Ken Buck

United States Representative