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**Letter to Editor**

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### **Covid-19 Outbreak: Need for permanent solution on wildlife sale and trade**

Whilst Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) welcomes the recent temporary ban by China on the hunting, sale, transportation and export of all wild animals in response to the Covid-19 outbreak, a more lasting solution is needed to prevent another repeat of such outbreaks, not only in China but in all countries.

This requires a permanent ban on the trade, sale and consumption of wildlife and stricter controls, in the enforcement and prosecution of such illegal activities, especially the consumption of wild animals.

Much of the trade in wildlife is already illegal, but strict enforcement and prosecution measures remain a challenge in many countries.

It is tragic indeed that the lessons were not learnt from the 2002-2003 outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), which was traced from consumption of wild animals in Guangdong, China.

In the SARS outbreak in China, although there was a crackdown on wildlife trafficking, sales persisted again about six months after the outbreak faded in mid-2003.

SAM fears that once the Covid-19 outbreak fades, countries will slow down their vigilance and continue to allow trade and sale of wild animals, including those that are endangered, due to the relentless demand for exotic delicacies and ingredients for traditional medicine.

The most recent coronavirus has been traced to one or more live animal markets in Wuhan city in China, where wet markets contain highly stressed animals, both wild and domestic, huddled in cages and tanks awaiting their turn to be slaughtered.

Experts believe that capture, transportation, trade and slaughter of wild animals are all contributors to the occurrence of serious health problems, as evident from the recent health scares.

Animals sold in these markets are often kept in filthy conditions and left to fester in their own waste, which means they develop diseases that can be passed on to human populations. Similar conditions are found in markets all over the country and have been the source of health concerns in the past.

Media photographs show customers, sometimes with children, browsing in Asian markets amid animals - some living, some freshly killed - in garishly lit, blood soaked stalls that invite enthusiasm for what the customers perceive as delectable produce, driven by the appetite for "warm meat".

From pangolins, badgers, snakes, salamanders, scorpions, hedgehogs, and wolf puppies, to ferret-badgers, raccoon dogs, and civets, there is a long tradition of consuming wild animal species.

What should be blamed are wildlife markets, restaurants, and gluttonous individuals, but not bats or other wildlife species.

The relentless demand for exotic delicacies and ingredients for traditional medicine is hastening the extinction of many wildlife species in addition to posing a perennial health threat that Chinese authorities have failed to fully address despite growing risks of a global pandemic.

In Indonesia too, despite warnings to take wildlife off the menu, bats, rodents and snakes, alongside domestic animal species, are easily available at markets. These animals are highly sought after by consumers attesting to their goodness with a thumbs up sign.

This calls for serious and urgent revision and strengthening of the wildlife protection laws and regulations in order to toughen the crackdown in wildlife trafficking.

Strong actions must be taken to ban wet markets trading in wildlife through constant supervision, inspection, and strengthening of law enforcement to ensure that wildlife trade is banned permanently.

A permanent ban will not only save human lives but contribute to a recovery of wildlife populations worldwide.

In fact, wildlife experts have stressed that the ban and regulation of wildlife products will need to be global and not just in China.

China must take the lead in fighting the illegal wildlife trade together with the governments of all countries. Banning the possession of wildlife traded or harvested illegally would reduce the demand and hence reduce the trade itself.

We have had enough wake up calls with the SARs and the Covid-19 outbreaks.

Let's act to prevent another health crisis around the world, that has not only led to preventable deaths and ill-health, but has also contributed to economic losses that continue to mount.

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