



Open Letter to the Prime Minister

Regarding the ongoing global Covid-19 disease and Vietnam's actions to address threats from illegal wildlife trade

His Excellency Nguyen Xuan Phuc,
Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam

We, the representatives of Vietnamese and international non-profit organizations working in nature and wildlife conservation, would like to bring to your attention one significant issue that we believe has the utmost importance in relation to the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) and reducing threats from further outbreaks.

As you are aware, the Covid-19 outbreak, has caused considerable concern to Vietnamese citizens in regards to their health and considerable costs to the Vietnamese economy and public health to control this emerging threat. As with the outbreak of SARS in 2002, which claimed 5 Vietnamese lives, this novel coronavirus is thought to have been transmitted to humans from wildlife as a result of close contact in a seafood market in Wuhan, China where illegal wildlife also was being sold. Peer-reviewed scientific publications have now demonstrated that the virus came originally from bats and has been passed via an intermediate wildlife host to humans. The species that acted as an intermediate host has not yet been identified for certain, although one research group in China has suggested it may be pangolins. Irrespective, it appears clear that transmission has occurred via close contact between humans and wildlife as part of ongoing illegal wildlife trade.

Looking back at recent history, several pandemics in the last twenty years showed clear links with virus reservoirs in wildlife populations. The SARS outbreak in 2002, which infected more than 8,000 people and resulted in 774 deaths in 37 countries, came from a novel betacoronavirus sourced from bats through masked palm civets as the intermediate host before reaching humans. The Middle East respiratory

syndrome (MERS) outbreak in 2012, which infected 2,494 and cost 858 human lives, also came from another coronavirus passing through dromedary camels to humans¹. The very recent bout of African Swine Fever (ASF) sweeping through China, Vietnam and nine other countries, has caused severe economic losses and is attributed to wild African suids². By the end of 2019, all 63 provinces in Vietnam were affected by ASF with over five million pigs euthanized.

The ongoing Covid-19 outbreak will also certainly cause significant damage to Vietnam. An initial assessment by the Ministry of Investment and Planning showed that Vietnam's GDP target will be 0.53% lower than expected if the outbreak is controlled within the first quarter of 2020 or 0.71% lower if the outbreak is controlled in the second quarter³. So far, the airline sector of Vietnam has been hard hit with about 10,000 billion Vietnam Dong lost due to flight cancellations during the outbreak⁴.

The lesson from SARS and now Covid-19 are clear: new viruses will continue to move from wildlife to people while illegal wildlife trade and wildlife consumption continue. Research conducted in Vietnam and beyond has demonstrated that corona viruses exist in wildlife populations and the illegal wildlife trade provides opportunities for these viruses to jump from wildlife to people. Despite efforts to reform wildlife protection policy and increase enforcement, illegal wildlife trade and consumption in Vietnam is still problematic. In addition, in recent years, there are growing flows of illegal wildlife products from international markets going to and through Vietnam.

Limiting interaction between wildlife and humans through strong enforcement against illegal wildlife trade and wildlife markets is the most effective approach to mitigating future risk associated with transmission of disease between animals and humans. As the source of this particular outbreak, China has already made some major steps to mitigate future risk in relation to zoonotic disease outbreaks from contact between wildlife and humans by temporarily closing all wildlife markets. This is in recognition of the serious threat faced.

¹ Genomic characterisation and epidemiology of 2019 novel coronavirus: implications for virus origins and receptor binding. Lu, Roujian et al. The Lancet, 2020. DOI:[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30251-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30251-8)

² African Swine Fever. UN Food and Agriculture Organization, 2020.
<http://www.fao.org/ag/againfo/programmes/en/empres/ASF/index.html>

³ Dịch virus corona tác động thế nào đến kinh tế Việt Nam? Source: <https://news.zing.vn/dich-virus-corona-tac-dong-the-nao-den-kinh-te-viet-nam-post1043954.html>

⁴ Hàng không Việt Nam thiệt hại lớn trước "cơn bão" nCoV. Source: <http://baochinhphu.vn/Kinh-te/Hang-khong-Viet-Nam-thiet-hai-lon-truoc-con-bao-nCoV/387320.vgp>

In order to ensure national safety, economic security and the health of the public and Vietnam's precious ecosystems, we request the Vietnamese government to take strong and sustainable actions to halt all illegal wildlife trade and consumption in Vietnam. This will require action to:

- Identify and close markets and other locations illegal wildlife is on sale. These establishments explicitly violate many existing laws of Vietnam.
- Identify restaurants illegally selling wild meat and enforce bans;
- Have compulsory requirements for all e-commerce platforms, social media, and online newspapers to sensor and remove all transactions and advertising of illegal wildlife products;
- Develop more stringent regulations to address risks relating to raising wildlife in captivity for trade and consumption;
- Reform judicial procedures to ensure effective punishment of wildlife crimes to act as a significant disincentive;
- Intensify awareness raising activities to inform the Vietnamese people of the risks of wildlife consumption to public security and to individual health; and
- Ensure cross ministerial collaboration to enact the above points.

We note that the Vietnam Administration of Forestry (VNFOREST) has sent a directive to provincial authorities on controlling wildlife trade to prevent spread of coronaviruses on 6th Feb 2020, following the directive of the Prime Minister on preventing and combating the nCoV disease on 28th January 2020. While we support this effort of VNFOREST, it's recommended that the government should take more concrete actions to eliminate reservoirs of future virus outbreaks as detailed above.

In addition to the public safety and economic rationale for such controls, these actions will help demonstrate Vietnam is a regional leader on the issue of combating illegal wildlife trade and biodiversity conservation.

We the undersigned stand ready to support the development and implementation of initiatives to reduce this threat to society.

Participating organizations

(signed)

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1. Center for Hands-on Actions and Networking for Growth and Environment (Change)
2. Free the Bears
3. Humane Society International- Vietnam
4. Center for Nature Conservation and Development (CCD)