

Bird flu kills four endangered civets in Vietnam

Bird flu has killed four endangered civets in northern Vietnam in the first confirmed cases of H5N1 virus infection in the species, officials said Tuesday.

Four Owston's palm civets, a catlike carnivorous species that the International Union for the Conservation of Nature lists as endangered, died between Feb 7 and 18 at Cuc Phuong National Park, 120 km south of Hanoi, said Truong Quang Bich, director of the park.

'Tests on the civets' samples showed earlier this month that the animals were positive for H5N1,' Bich said, referring to the strain of bird flu that can also be deadly in humans.

The civets, which have pointed faces similar to a shrew, are the first mammals, other than humans, to have died from bird flu in Vietnam, said Hoang Van Nam, deputy director of the Ministry of Agriculture's Animal Health Department.

'We haven't been able to confirm that the virus has mutated to easily infect mammals, but we are afraid it has,' Nam said.

The H5N1 virus has been found in numerous animal species other than birds in other countries, including cats, pigs and tigers.

Bich said the civets, which were being kept in a semi-wild enclosure at the park's conservation centre, had not been fed poultry but he suspected that infected wild birds might have entered their habitat and spread the disease.

Vietnam lists the Owston's palm civet in its Red Book of endangered species, which are illegal to trade or transport.

However, the civets' population is threatened by an illegal trade in body parts for traditional medicine. Civet meat, particularly if caught in the wild, is thought to be an aphrodisiac in some regions.

Fresh avian-influenza outbreaks among birds have been detected in 10 provinces in Vietnam since the beginning of the year, prompting local authorities to cull tens of thousands of ducks and chickens, according to the Animal Health Department.

Bird flu has infected 105 people in Vietnam and killed 51 of them since it first appeared in the country in late 2003.

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