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**Joint open letter to:**

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus  
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Dr Zhang Qi  
Co-ordinator of Traditional and Complementary  
Medicine Unit (TCM)  
Department of Service Delivery and Safety  
World Health Organisation  
Avenue Appia 20  
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6<sup>th</sup> April 2020

Dear Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and Dr Zhang Qi,

**COVID-19: Health risks and wildlife<sup>1</sup> markets – the need for a permanent global ban on wildlife markets and a highly precautionary approach to wildlife trade.**

The undersigned organisations acknowledge and commend the World Health Organisation’s current efforts to contain the pandemic spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

On the occasion of World Health Day, in the midst of a global pandemic believed to have originated in a live wildlife market, we call upon the WHO to publicly and unequivocally state the proven link between these markets and serious threats to human health. In line with its stated mission to serve public health at all times, we urge the WHO to recommend that governments worldwide permanently ban live wildlife markets and the use of wildlife in traditional medicine. This decisive action, well within the WHO’s mandate, would be an impactful first step in adopting a highly precautionary approach to wildlife trade that poses a risk to human health.

While a robust global response is critical in detecting, treating and reducing transmission, it is equally necessary to take vital measures to prevent similar emerging infectious diseases developing into pandemics with the associated threats to human life, and social and economic well-being.

The COVID-19 outbreak is believed to have originated at wildlife markets in China, and transmitted to humans as a result of close proximity between wildlife and people.<sup>2</sup> Further research suggests that bats and pangolins may have been involved in the transmission chain of the virus to people<sup>3</sup>. But let us stress that it was the actions of people that created the environment in which this transmission was possible.

This is not the first time that infectious diseases have been linked to wild animals in recent years. Between 2002 and 2003, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), inflicted by a coronavirus which is also believed to have emerged from wildlife markets in China, resulted in more than 8,000 human

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<sup>1</sup> In this document the term ‘wildlife’ refers to fauna in the wild or bred in captivity.

<sup>2</sup> Shereen, M.A., Khan, S., Kazmi, A., Bashir, N. and Siddique, R., 2020. COVID-19 infection: origin, transmission, and characteristics of human coronaviruses. Journal of Advanced Research.

<sup>3</sup> Andersen, G.A., Rambaut, A., Lipkin, W.I. et al. The proximal origin of SARS-CoV-2. Nat Med (2020)

cases across 29 countries, and 774 deaths<sup>4</sup>. Failure to enforce permanent bans on all wildlife markets then allowed for a similar, but more severe, disease to emerge. Other significant zoonotic diseases, the transmission of which has been associated with wildlife, include Ebola, MERS, HIV, bovine tuberculosis, rabies, and leptospirosis.<sup>5</sup>

Zoonotic diseases are responsible for over two billion cases of human illness and over two million human deaths each year.<sup>5</sup> How many of these cases directly or indirectly originate from wildlife is hard to calculate, due to overlapping reservoirs in livestock and wild animal populations. However, considering the significance of wildlife as a reservoir of emerging infectious diseases, wildlife origins of zoonoses must be of primary concern. Sixty percent (60%) of emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic and 70% of these are thought to originate from wildlife.<sup>6</sup>

The risk of zoonotic disease transmission is heightened further by the unregulated and unhygienic conditions associated with wildlife markets, where close proximity between humans and animals provide the perfect opportunity for pathogens to spread. This risk is further exacerbated by the conditions in which animals are typically farmed or collected from the wild, transported to and held at such markets, which inevitably result in large numbers of animals of different species being held in crowded conditions in close proximity, causing immense stress and weakening their immune systems. Such conditions, coupled with close proximity to people at wildlife markets, provide the ideal situation for pathogens to replicate, spread, and potentially infect people.

Pangolins, which are considered likely by some researchers to be involved in the transmission chain of COVID-19, are commonly used as ingredients for Traditional Medicine, as are many other wildlife species such as turtles, leopards, tigers, lions and bears, with bear bile injections being officially recommended as a treatment for COVID-19.<sup>7</sup> These animals are either farmed or poached from the wild to supply the demand - a practice that is entirely unnecessary given the viable plant or non-wildlife based alternatives recognized by Traditional Medicine. Risk of disease transmission is prevalent across all aspects of wildlife trade, which supplies products to the Traditional Medicine industry. For example, bovine tuberculosis has been documented among wild and captive-bred lions, posing a substantial risk of zoonosis to consumers and people involved in the lion bone trade, particularly those who work in breeding farms, slaughter and processing facilities in South Africa. Reptiles such as snakes and geckos, which are also used in Traditional Medicine, are frequent sources of Salmonellosis infections in people.<sup>8</sup>

While Traditional Medicine is a recognized medicinal system in many countries and cultures, and can play an important health role, the vast majority of ingredients are plant or mineral based, with hundreds of recognized alternatives to ingredients derived from wildlife. The trade in wildlife and parts and products derived from them for Traditional Medicine is unnecessary and indefensible, as it poses a risk to global health. Studies have highlighted that over 80% of Traditional Medicine consumers would consider herbal or synthetic alternatives to wild animal products.<sup>9,10</sup> In China,

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<sup>4</sup> World Health Organisation. Summary of probable SARS cases with onset of illness from 1 November 2002 to 31 July 2003. [https://www.who.int/csr/sars/country/table2004\\_04\\_21/en/](https://www.who.int/csr/sars/country/table2004_04_21/en/)

<sup>5</sup> Grace, D., Mutua, F., Ochungo, P., et al. Mapping of poverty and likely zoonoses hotspots. Zoonoses Project 4. Report to the UK Department for International Development. 2012

<sup>6</sup> Jones, K.E., Patel, N.G., et al. Global trends in emerging infectious diseases. *Nature*. 2008

<sup>7</sup> Office of the Chinese Medicine Bureau, General Office of the Health and Health Commission. Notice on Issuing a New Coronavirus Pneumonia Diagnosis and Treatment Plan (Trial Version 7). issued March 03 2020. Available as PDF on [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2020-03/04/content\\_5486705.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2020-03/04/content_5486705.htm)

<sup>8</sup> Mermin, J., Hutwagner, L., Vugia, D., et al. Reptiles, Amphibians, and Human Salmonella Infection: A Population-Based, Case-Control Study. *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 38 (Supp 3). 2004

<sup>9</sup> World Animal Protection. Cruel Cures – The industry behind bear bile production and how to end it. 2020

<sup>10</sup> Moorhouse, T.P., Coals, P.G.R., D’Cruze, N., Macdonald, D.W. Reduce or redirect? Which social marketing interventions could influence demand for traditional medicines? *Biological Conservation* 242.2020

academics recognized that a ban on wildlife consumption is not enough to protect public health from wildlife-associated diseases. They called on the government to support transitioning the wildlife farming industry away from the production of Traditional Medicine.<sup>11</sup>

Any policies and practices that sustain the wildlife trade carry a huge and unpredictable public health risk that could lead to future outbreaks and pandemics of zoonotic diseases among human populations.

The impact of COVID-19 in terms of loss of human life, physical and mental health, the global economy, livelihoods and the quality of public life has been utterly devastating and cannot be underestimated. At the time of writing, COVID-19 has led to 1,218,114 confirmed cases and 65,841 deaths across 208 countries. According to calculations by the UN and others, the COVID-19 pandemic could cost the global economy between US\$1 - 2.7 trillion and is triggering a global recession forcing states to introduce costly stimulus packages.<sup>12,13</sup> The costs to the international community of fighting a global pandemic are vastly higher than the costs of preventing it in the first place, including eliminating live wildlife markets and funding the coordinated global response needed to bring an end to the wildlife trade.

**In conclusion, the demand for wildlife and wildlife products is a primary cause of the emergence and spread of zoonotic diseases and a severe risk to global health. We call on the World Health Organisation to recognise that it has a significant role to play to mitigate such global health risks.**

**We therefore strongly urge the World Health Organisation to:**

- Recommend to governments worldwide that they institute a permanent ban on live wildlife markets, drawing an unequivocal link between these markets and their proven threats to human health.
- Recommend to governments that they address the potential risks to human health from the trade in wildlife - including collection from the wild, ranching, farming, transport, and trade through physical or online markets for any purpose – and act to close down or limit such trade in order to mitigate those risks.
- Unequivocally exclude the use of wildlife, including from captive bred specimens, in the WHO's definition and endorsement of Traditional Medicine and revise WHO's 2014-2023 Traditional Medicine Strategy accordingly to reflect this change.
- Assist governments and lead a coordinated response among the World Trade Organisation, World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and other multilateral organisations worldwide in awareness-raising activities to clearly inform of the risks of wildlife trade to public health, social cohesion, economic stability, law and order, and individual health.
- Support and encourage initiatives that deliver alternative sources of protein to subsistence consumers of wild animals, in order to further reduce the risk to human health.

We welcome your consideration of this important matter and stand ready to assist.

Yours sincerely,

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<sup>11</sup> Wang, H., Shao, J., Chuai, Z., et al. Wildlife consumption ban is insufficient. *Science*. Vol 367, Issue 6485. 2020

<sup>12</sup> United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. Coronavirus: Can policymakers avert a trillion-dollar crisis? 9 March 2020: <https://unctad.org/en/pages/newsdetails.aspx?OriginalVersionID=2300>

<sup>13</sup> Bloomberg. Coronavirus Could Cost the Global Economy \$2.7 Trillion. 6 March 2020: <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2020-coronavirus-pandemic-global-economic-risk/>

**For and behalf of the following organisations:**

1	AAP Animal Advocacy and Protection	121	Humane Society International - Africa
2	Action for Elephants	122	Humane Society International - Australia
3	Africa Network for Animal Welfare	123	Humane Society International - Global
4	African Pangolin Working Group	124	HUTAN - Kinabatangan Orang-utan Conservation Programme
5	All Life In A Viable Environment	125	In Defence of Animals - India
6	Amboseli Trust for Elephants	126	In Defence of Animals - USA
7	Ananta Jyoti Dhayn Kendra	127	In Defense of Animals International
8	Animal Alliance of Canada	128	Institute for Critical Animal Studies - Africa
9	Animal Concerns Research & Education Society	129	International Aid For Animal Foundation
10	Animal Defenders International	130	International Animal Rescue
11	Animal Friends Jogja	131	International Fund for Animal Welfare
12	Animal Guardians	132	International Otter Survival Fund
13	Animal Kingdom Foundation	133	International Wildlife Bond
14	Animal Legal Defense Fund	134	Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
15	Animal Liberation Sanctuary	135	Japan Anti-Vivisection Association
16	Animal People Forum	136	Japan Tiger and Elephant Fund
17	Animal Projects & Environmental Education Sdn Bhd	137	Japan Wildlife Conservation Society
18	Animal Protection Agency	138	Korea Animal Rights Advocates
19	Animal Protection and Environmental Sanctuary	139	KYMA sea conservation & research
20	Animal Protection Denmark / Dyrenes Beskyttelse	140	La Fondation Droit Animal, Ethique et Sciences (LFDA)
21	Animal Protection Party of Canada	141	Lady Freethinker
22	Animal Sanctuary Trust Indonesia	142	Landmark Foundation
23	Animal Society for the Protection of Animals (Macau)	143	Lawrence Anthony Earth Organization
24	Animal Talk Africa	144	Liberia Chimpanzee Rescue & Protection
25	Animal Welfare And Anti Harassment Society	145	Lifelong Animal Protection
26	Animals Asia Foundation	146	Love Animal House Thailand
27	Animals Australia	147	Melbourn Dolphin
28	Annamiticus	148	Monkey Helpline
29	Ape Alliance	149	Moving Animals
30	Association Daridibó	150	National Association of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty
31	Baboon Matters	151	National Council of SPCAs South Africa

32	Bali Street Dog Fund Australia	152	Natural Resources Conservation Network
33	Ban Animal Trading	153	NY4Whales
34	Bat Conservation Trust	154	Oceanic Preservation Society
35	Bears in Mind	155	OneKind
36	Beauty Without Cruelty - South Africa	156	Orangutan Appeal UK
37	Big Cat Rescue	157	Orangutan Foundation
38	Biofuelwatch	158	Orca Rescues Foundation
39	Blood Lions	159	OSCAP
40	Blue Cross of India	160	Outraged South African Citizens Against Rhino Poaching
41	Blue Sky Society Trust	161	Pan African Sanctuary Alliance
42	Bonobo Conservation Initiative	162	Panthera
43	Born Free Foundation	163	Panthera Africa
44	Born Free USA	164	Pegasus Foundation
45	Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre	165	People for Animal Care and Kindness
46	Borneo Nature Foundation	166	People for Animals, Odisha
47	Brighter Green	167	People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)
48	Bring the Elephant Home	168	Performing Animal Welfare Society
49	Cape Leopard Trust	169	Pettus Crowe Foundation
50	Captured in Africa Foundation	170	Pit-Track K9 Conservation & Anti-Poaching
51	CATCA Environmental and Wildlife Society	171	Pro Elephant Network
52	Center for Biological Diversity	172	Pro Wildlife
53	Centre for Animal Rehabilitation and Education	173	Rapad Maroc (Morocco)
54	Cetacean Society International	174	Responsabile Nazionale Diritti Animali
55	Change for Animals Foundation	175	Rettet den Regenwald (Rainforest Rescue)
56	Chelui4lions	176	Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
57	Coalition of African Animal Welfare Organisations	177	SAI (Save Animals Initiative) Sanctuary Trust
58	Code Animal	178	Sanctuary Education Advisory Specialists
59	Community Dog Welfare Kopan	179	Sanctuary for Health & Reconnection to Animals & Nature
60	Compassion in World Farming	180	Sarawak Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
61	Compassion Unlimited Plus Action	181	Save The Asian Elephants
62	Conservación de Mamíferos Marinos de Mexico	182	Scorpion Foundation Indonesia
63	Countryside Management Association	183	Sea Shepherd Legal
64	CPR Environmental Education Centre	184	Sea Shepherd South Africa

65	Danau Girang Field	185	SEY Animal Welfare Finland
66	David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation	186	Shark Research Institute
67	Defenders of Wildlife	187	Showing Animals Respect and Kindness
68	Department of Forestry and Wildlife Management, Taraba State University Jalingo	188	Society for Dolphin Conservation, Germany
69	Deutscher Tierschutzbund e.V. (Germany)	189	Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals - Selangor
70	Djurskyddet Sverige (Animal Welfare Sweden)	190	Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals - Singapore
71	Dogstop	191	Society for the Protection of Animals Ljubimci
72	Dutch Gorilla Foundation	192	Society for Travelers Respecting Animal Welfare
73	Dutch Society for the Protection of Animals (Dierenbescherming)	193	Soi Dog Foundation
74	Earth Island Institute Int'l Marine Mammal Project	194	South Peninsula Customary Khoisan Council
75	Eco Activists for Governance and Law Enforcement (EAGLE Network)	195	Southern African Fight for Rhinos
76	Elephanatics	196	Species Survival Network
77	Elephant Human Relations Aid	197	Stichting Painted Dog Conservation
78	Elephant Reintegration Trust	198	Stichting SPOTS
79	Elephants Alive	199	Sumatran Orangutan Society
80	Elephant Voices	200	Tanglewood Foundation
81	Elephation	201	Taraba Nature Conservation Initiative - Nigeria
82	EMS Foundation	202	Teyeliz, A.C
83	Endangered Species Coalition	203	The Corbett Foundation
84	Environmental Investigation Agency	204	The Emergent Disease Foundation
85	Equilibrium Futures	205	The Gorilla Foundation
86	Eurogroup for Animals	206	The Humane Society of Canada
87	FAADA, Spain	207	The Jane Goodall Institute - Nepal
88	Federation of Indian Animal Protection Organisations	208	The Philippines Animal Welfare Society
89	FIAPO	209	The Winsome Constance Kindness Trust
90	Fish Welfare Initiative	210	Tree of Compassion
91	Fondation Brigitte Bardot	211	Trésor Foundation
92	Fondation Franz Weber	212	TRUNKS & LEAVES Inc
93	For Elephants	213	Tusk Trust
94	For the Love of Wildlife (FLOW)	214	Unexpected Wildlife Refuge
95	For Tigers	215	Vervet Monkey Foundation
96	Foundation Chimbo	216	Voice for dogs abroad
97	Four Paws - International	217	Voice4Lions - South Africa
98	Four Paws - South Africa	218	Voice4Lions - UK
99	Franciscan Order - Hong Kong	219	VShine Animal Protection Association

100	Fraternité pour le respect animal	220	Water and Environment Media Network - Uganda
101	Freeland	221	Wellbeing International
102	Friends of Animals	222	Wild Futures
103	Friends of Conservation UK	223	Wild Law Institute
104	Friends of the Orangutans Malaysia	224	Wild Welfare
105	Future 4 Wildlife	225	WildAid
106	Future for Elephants	226	WildAid Southern Africa
107	Future for Elephants e.V.	227	Wildlife ACT
108	Gearing Up 4 Gorillas	228	Wildlife Alliance
109	Global Animal Law	229	Wildlife Impact
110	Global March for Elephant and Rhino Poaching	230	Wildlife Rescue
111	Global White Lion Protection Trust	231	Wildlife Rescue and Conservation Association, Guatemala
112	Gordon Consulting New Zealand	232	Working Wild
113	Great Apes Film Initiative	233	World Animal Net
114	Greek Animal Welfare Fund	234	World Animal Protection - Africa
115	Green Girls in Africa	235	World Animal Protection - International
116	GREY2K USA Worldwide	236	World Cetacean Alliance
117	Greyhound Compassion	237	World For All Animal Care And Adoptions
118	Help Animals India	238	Zoocheck Canada
119	Himalayan Animal Rescue Trust	239	Zoological Society of London
120	Humane Research Australia		