

Measures in Budget 2021 have been put in place to encourage economic growth for the country.
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Screening 1.7 million

The government wants no repeat of the Top Glove incident where Covid-19 positive cases have hit four figures and forced the manufacturer to close 28 of its factories for now. Besides imposing mandatory testing for nearly 1.7 million foreign workers, operators who crowd their dorms will be fined RM50,000 – per worker, a move which takes effect today.

> See reports by SIRA HABIBU, ALLISON LAI and WANI MUTHIAH on page 8



Wild pangolins test negative for Covid-19

Study finds the endangered species in Malaysia pose no threat to human health and do not carry the dreaded virus. > See report by RAZAK AHMAD on page 12

Photo: M.S. Azian EcoHealth Alliance/ Conservation Medicine

Wild pangolins pose no harm

Study shows the critically endangered mammal is not a threat to humans

By **RAZAK AHMAD**
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PETALING JAYA: Malaysia's critically endangered wild pangolins have tested negative for Covid-19, indicating that they pose no threat to human health amid reports that they are possible carriers of the virus.

This is the key finding of a recently published study which further underscores the importance of protecting one of the most trafficked mammals in the world.

Researchers from the PREDICT programme that was set up to look for novel zoonotic viruses in wildlife before they become human epidemics have tested thousands of animals including 334 wild, rescued and seized illegally trafficked pangolins in Malaysia.

The pangolin samples were collected from animals before or just after they entered the illegal wildlife trade.

All tested negative for viruses that could potentially threaten humans including SARS-CoV-2, which causes Covid-19.

"These findings suggest that wild pangolins pose no threat to human health.

"It also highlights the importance of carefully ending the trade of wildlife and improving biosecurity

at wet markets to avoid having wild animals co-mingling with farmed animals and humans," said Tom Hughes, EcoHealth Alliance project coordinator in Malaysia and director of Conservation Medicine.

EcoHealth Alliance is a global conservation and pandemic-prevention non-governmental group, which managed the PREDICT project in Malaysia.

PREDICT was funded by United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) Emerging Pandemic Threats programme.

As Covid-19 started to spread throughout the world early this year, reports began to emerge linking the disease to pangolins with some suggesting that they are a potential host for the virus.

Scientists have also detected SARS-CoV-2 in captive pangolins confiscated from the wildlife trade in China though no one knew if wild pangolins carried the virus.

"We concluded that the detections of SARS-CoV-2-related viruses in pangolins are most likely a result of their exposure to infected people, wildlife, or other animals after they entered the illegal wildlife trade," said Jimmy Lee, EcoHealth Alliance's field manager in Malaysia.

Lee and Hughes are among the authors of the research paper titled, "No Evidence Of Coronaviruses Or

Other Potentially Zoonotic Viruses In Sunda Pangolins (*Manis Javanica*) Entering The Wildlife Trade Via Malaysia," which was published on Nov 23 in the *EcoHealth* journal.

The paper can be viewed online at <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10393-020-01503-x>

Malaysia is a hotspot for the pangolin trade, and in just one case in February last year, close to 30,000kg of pangolins were seized in Sabah alone.

Pangolin scales are used in traditional Chinese medicines, while its meat is deemed an expensive delicacy.

Lee said the research findings contrasted with the findings in China due to the point in the supply chain at which samples were taken.

"The wildlife trade transports pangolins from Malaysia up through South-East Asia where animals are often housed together in groups from different geographic regions, and often with other species, creating plenty of opportunity for viral transmission among and within species," Lee noted.

In Malaysia, PREDICT – which was set up in 2009 – has been carried out as part of a long-term collaboration between EcoHealth Alliance and Conservation Medicine, the Department of Wildlife and National Parks, the Health

Ministry, the Department of Veterinary Services, Sabah Wildlife Department, Sabah State Health Department, Danau Girang Field Center, Universiti Malaysia Sabah and Universiti Putra Malaysia.

This ongoing collaboration has also helped to develop personnel and laboratory capacity in Malaysia and establish sustainable disease surveillance systems for wildlife, and livestock and people with high levels of exposure to wildlife.

The Sabah Wildlife Department and Universiti Malaysia Sabah, which are among the local partners involved in PREDICT, noted the importance of the collaboration.

"Sabah Wildlife Department's collaborative efforts with EcoHealth Alliance through the PREDICT Project and other programmes have netted some interesting results, identifying novel viruses within Sabah's wildlife, and improving our understanding of zoonotic viruses in general.

"Further collaborative efforts with EcoHealth Alliance and other local stakeholders help enhance Sabah's readiness to respond to disease emergence events and build capacity for disease surveillance of novel viruses," said Dr Sen Nathan, assistant director of the Sabah Wildlife Department.

Prof Helen Lasimbang, Director

of Hospital Universiti Malaysia Sabah, said the pangolin study was an important effort involving partners from different countries.

"UMS is pleased to be actively involved in this global effort, working together with local and international researchers' augurs well for the high-impact research that is much needed in this area.

"The smuggling of this species needs to stop," she said.

Prof Vijay Kumar, a molecular geneticist at Universiti Malaysia Sabah's Biotechnology Research Institute said it was pertinent to better understand the viruses that some wildlife may host.

"It is important that we identify potential zoonotic pathogenic viruses in wildlife species such as pangolins and bats before they become pandemics," he said.

EcoHealth Alliance president Dr Peter Daszak said the pangolin study shows that collaboration between scientists and government agencies can add real value to law enforcement operations to curb wildlife smuggling.

"By testing seized pangolins for viruses, we've been able to expand our understanding of the origins of the most significant pandemic of this century, and also we hope to benefit pangolin conservation," said Daszak.

Malaysian 'don' behind cigarette smuggling ring

By **AUSTIN CAMOENS**
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DENGKIL: A Malaysian man is believed to be the mastermind behind an illicit cigarette smuggling ring bringing in 11.3 million cigarettes detected by the Customs Department recently.

The syndicate had smuggled in the cigarettes before the Custom's Internal Investigation Unit and Integrity Division caught up with them and detained four lorries at various locations around Kuala Lumpur.

Customs Department director-general Datuk Seri Abdul Latif Abdul Kadir said a series of raids were conducted in Kepong, Jinjang and Batu Caves on Nov 18.

"We monitored the syndicate's movements for nearly two days before we caught them. We found 11.3 million cigarettes worth RM2.3mil involving RM7.7mil in unpaid duties," he said yesterday.

He said the syndicate was believed to have transferred the



cigarettes from a container into the four lorries to be distributed in other areas.

"We believe the syndicate leader is a local man," he said, adding that

four men including a foreigner were arrested.

Abdul Latif said they were charged at the Kuala Lumpur court on Nov 20 and have been released

on bail.

He said between January and Nov 1 this year, the Customs Department has seized 785 million cigarettes worth close to RM1bil.

Major haul:
Abdul Latif (third from right) showing members of the press the illicit cigarettes seized by the department.
— MOHD SAHAR MISNI/The Star

Melaka gets ready for spike in waterborne diseases

MELAKA: The state government is taking precautionary measures against the spread of water and vector-borne diseases after torrential rains caused massive floods in the state.

Melaka rural development, flood management and green technology committee chairman Datuk Seri Idris Haron said the wet season was expected to continue and health-care providers in the state have been asked to brace for a possible spike in various types of diseases that are often associated with floods.

"We expect more evacuations as the rainy season is far from over and the state is monitoring the transmission of water and vector-borne diseases," he said yesterday.

Idris said he also raised the need for everyone to adhere to strict standard operating procedures during a meeting with agencies involved in rescuing and managing evacuation centres.

"We can't afford to be lackadaisical in implementing health requirements at such centres in view that threats from Covid-19 were still out there," he said.

Idris said among the diseases that commonly occur during floods is typhoid fever.

He said contractors commissioned to supply meals to evacuees should ensure clean drinking water and are up to date on vaccinations.

Idris also said it was important that mosquito nets and repellents were adequately provided at evacuation centres to reduce the risk of dengue fever as such cases had increased dramatically in the state in the past few months.

Sarawak group against wild boar meat trade

By **SHARON LING**
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KUCHING: A state environmental group has objected to a call for Dayaks in Kapit to be given leeway to sell wild boar meat to supplement their income which had been hard hit by the economic impact of Covid-19.

Urging the Sarawak Forestry Corporation (SFC) to continue with the enforcement operations, Sarawak Eco-Warriors said it was an offence under the state's Wildlife Protection Ordinance to sell or buy wildlife or wildlife products hunted

anywhere in the state.

"The ordinance was enacted for the purpose of curbing issues linked with exploitation and extinction of native and endemic species in Sarawak," said its adviser Mark Liao responding to Deputy Chief Minister Tan Sri James Masing's call last week for SFC to allow the Dayaks in Kapit, a rural district in central Sarawak, to sell wild boar meat to supplement their income.

Masing said elderly folk in Kapit had complained to him that SFC officers had confiscated their wild boar meat for sale, adding that their livelihood depended on these sales.

Liao however said generating

income from exploiting wildlife was not only environmentally unsustainable but was also a short-term financial solution.

He said local leaders should look towards new solutions for native communities to generate sustainable legal income.

Sarawak Eco-Warriors secretary Ashley Kho meanwhile said that the Covid-19 crisis highlighted the ongoing risk of consuming wildlife products.

"If these markets persist, the public will continue to face potentially more lethal viruses. Instead of subjecting ourselves to these risks, we should help those affected to look

for more sustainable means of income," she said.

Meanwhile, SFC reiterated that the Wildlife Protection Ordinance does not permit the sale of wildlife, including non-protected species taken from the wild.

It said natives residing in native areas were permitted to hunt for their own consumption but not for trade or sale.

"This is to ensure that rural communities continue to have the food that they need. Studies show that wildlife trade in town is the single cause of the decline of wildlife and depriving rural communities of their source of protein," said SFC.