

World Rat Population Out of Control; Plague Strikes Nearly 1000 in Burma

April 10 (IPS) — Bubonic plague, the Black Death of the Middle Ages, has spread to nearly a thousand people in the city of Mandalay, Burma, the World Health Organization in Geneva revealed this week. Forty cases were reported last week. Unless stopped by coordinated international action in the next five to six weeks, these outbreaks will be the beginning of a generalized irreversible breakdown of the earth's ecology. Plague will spread across the globe to New York, Detroit, Naples and Hamburg, emerging into a devastating pandemic by fall, which will doom hundreds of millions and perhaps the human race itself. All barriers to the global spread of this deadly rat-borne disease have been broken down by the massive increase in rat populations worldwide, an increase which has produced 10 billion rats in South Asia, and the overrunning of towns by rat hordes in Sweden, Denmark, and North Germany.

The choice for the human race is the International Development Bank or death.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the outbreak of plague in Mandalay is continuing to spread, and threatens to travel downriver to Rangoon, a major port city of 2 million, and thence globally. In an interview yesterday, a Washington-based plague expert for the U.S. Public Health Service concurred, and warned that the entire Indian sub-continent was immediately threatened. Terming the Mandalay outbreak an "international catastrophe," he stated: "An epidemic of this size undoubtedly means progression from the bubonic to the pneumonic form. Pneumonic plague is much more deadly and extremely contagious and could easily spread to Rangoon, Bangladesh, India and beyond." Fourteen plague deaths have been reported by the Burmese government, but this is thought to be a gross underestimate, since plague mortality generally runs between 5 to 20 per cent in treated cases and over 90 per cent in untreated cases.

This outbreak of plague, the worst in 25 years and the first in an urban area is no local problem, but a warning sign of impending global ecological breakdown. Plague has historically recurred in deadly epidemic form at the height of economic and social crises, including the Black Death of 1348 in which half of Europe died.

Plague, an infectious disease of animals, principally wild and domestic rodents is spread mainly by rats and rat-borne fleas, and transmitted to man through the bite of infected fleas. In man, the disease is characterized by the abrupt onset of fever, headache, vomiting, delirium, and collapse. Bleeding in the skin, nose, urine and gut is common. Because of the characteristically enlarged lymph nodes near the site of the flea bite, called "buboes," the disease is known as bubonic plague.

In up to 5 or more per cent of bubonic cases, the bacteria spread through the blood to the lungs, causing a plague pneumonia, or pneumonic plague. At the pneumonic stage the disease becomes highly contagious from man to man, as the abundant bloody sputum is teeming with plague bacteria. If the disease is spread through the cough-air droplet route, this results directly in primary pneumonic plague, which is

extremely contagious and invariably fatal in one to five days without treatment. Even treated cases have an enormous mortality rate, owing to the rapid progress of the disease before there is time to administer antibiotics.

At this point, plague is entrenched in more than 200 species of rodents around the world. The domestic city rats, the roof rat and the Norwegian rat, common in the U.S. and Europe, are among those capable of carrying the disease.

During periods of economic development, such as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, its spread was blocked by the abolition of Medieval conditions — the isolation of rural and urban rats, urban sanitation which denied rats food and separated them from humans, the elimination of rats from ships, and the growth of human resistance to the disease through higher living standards. Plague returned during the crisis which peaked in 1918, then subsided, and is returning again now in the wake of economic breakdown and the return of medieval conditions of sanitation throughout the world. These conditions ensure that a new pandemic will be far more devastating than that at the beginning of the century which took tens of millions of lives.

Rats and Super Rats

The most graphic symptom of the breakdown of barriers to the spread of plague is the worldwide explosion of the rat population. Further, because of the collapse of rural ecology due to the collapse of agriculture, the increasing rat populations especially in the Third World are being driven toward crowded and often impoverished and filthy urban areas. Simultaneously the elimination of funding and staffing for rat control has made such programs ineffectual to control the dangerous growth of rat populations.

In Southeast Asia, in regions around Burma, rats are fleeing the famine-stricken countryside into the filthy crowded cities. There are 5 million rats in Rangoon alone — the WHO estimates that 10 per cent of them are likely carrying plague. In Southeast Asia as a whole there are more than 10 billion rats.

In West Africa, since two months ago, rats have been swarming by the millions out of Senegal and into the surrounding countries, destroying crops as they go. In Northeast Brazil, where plague is endemic, drought has driven rats out of the rural areas towards the crowded cities of the coast, such as Recife. In southern Brazilian cities like Sao Paulo there are 10-15 rats for every human being. This month the Swedish town of Ljusdal was overrun by rats, and hordes of "bison rats," some a foot long, were reported in the towns of Jutland in Northern Germany and neighboring Denmark.

With the growth of rat populations has come the rapid evolution of poison-resistant strains. European rat control experts report the spread of such strains in Great Britain, Germany and Scandinavia, while such resistant "super-rats" have been reported in New York.

The giant growth of rat populations is the direct consequence of bankers' austerity, which is responsible for the destruction of the food supplies of the Third World and the

disruption of the garbage collection, general sanitation and rat control of programs of advanced sector cities. The U.S. government rat control program has been phased out over an eight-year period, in many cities falling by 50 per cent in the past year. In Baltimore, a city with two million rats, the fiscal 1977 budget will cut rat control by 50 per cent on top of 50 per cent cuts already sustained. Manpower will be cut from 92 to 20. The area of the city regularly cleared of rodents has already dropped from 2,000 blocks to 500. In Chicago, rat control is limited to three small regions of the city, and as soon as rat control workers leave the areas, the rats return in full force.

The situation is worst of all in New York City, whose rat population is more than 10 million and growing rapidly as uncollected garbage piles up on the streets. New budget cuts to be effected July 1 will slash the already gutted rat control program by 50 per cent, virtually eliminating its effect. In an article today entitled "Cut Pest Control and Watch Rats Multiply," the New York Daily News cited city Health Department official Randy Dupree as warning of a "rampant increase" of the city's rat population as a result of the cuts. The budget cuts, which will reduce the program from \$3.8 million presently to \$2.38 million in 1976-77 and cost it an additional \$500,000 in federal matching funds according to Dupree, would reduce the rat control staff from 600 to 340.

Dupree further reported that the rat control division has already been receiving complaints from areas of the city from which they "have never received calls before." and stated: "That means to me that rats are already on the increase."

The News stated that "there are 1,900 hard-core blocks in the city where there are anywhere from 10 to 25 rats per person."

Furthermore, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey reported that incoming ships from Burma and other plague areas such as Brazil are not being inspected.

In Germany, rat control experts report rapid increases in rat populations with cuts in sanitation funds. In European ports, incoming ships are no longer carefully inspected, leading to rat multiplication in port cities. Rats are now seen in daylight in some parts of Berlin.

Uncontrolled rat populations grow astronomically — one rat has 80 to 90 offspring a year.

The Spread of Plague

Most of the trade from these ports is widely known to be black market and is carried by ships that will not be inspected under the present minimal rat inspection programs.

These global conditions of rat population explosion and migration make the spread of plague inevitable. Within the next few months, other urban plague foci will develop in Brazil and the African Sahel. Once established in cities, especially ports, spread of the disease will be rapid. From the current focus in Mandalay, spread to Rangoon is practically certain and has probably already occurred. Unless action is taken within weeks, plague will spread to India, Ceylon and Indonesia, where nutrition and sanitation levels will ensure mass death. By midsummer ships from these areas will bring plague to the port and slum areas and huge rat populations of Naples, Amsterdam, Genoa, Seattle, and by early fall to New York, Chicago, Baltimore and every other major port.

Already, U.S. ships entering Swedish ports have been

found infested with rats. As plague infected rats enter each city the spread of disease will be rapid. As flea-ridden rats die, plague infected fleas will leave them, infesting human beings and infecting them through bites. Children in slums playing with dead rats will develop black buboes and die within days. Hospitals will become major sources for spread of the disease. Once established in slum areas, bubonic epidemics spread by rats will tend to become pneumonic plague, spread directly human to human by coughing.

Deadly Diseases

With global resistance to plague virtually non-existent and drug resistant strains likely to develop with massive use of antibiotics, death rates from the plague will be astronomical. But the plague will not be alone in its effects. By fall, influenza of the new deadly swine variety will simultaneously be sweeping the globe. The general breakdown of sanitation already evident in epidemics of lice in Naples and Brooklyn, New York will facilitate the spread of other pest-borne diseases, such as typhus. The collapse of sewage systems will allow for the transmission of pandemics of disease spread by contaminated water.

Over the past year in Italy water-borne diseases such as para-typhoid, have increased by 90 per cent, while in Latin America, polio spread by fecal contamination of water, has increased by 400 per cent. The combined impact of these spreading and overlapping pandemics on populations already weakened by malnutrition, and speed-up will be self-feeding collapse, total disruption of production, and general holocaust.

The response of local officials, and of the bourgeois press to this catastrophically dangerous situation has been to criminally cover it up. Reports from Burma are few and far between — the local press has entirely blacked out the epidemic. The WHO, while releasing some data on case numbers, admits to not having up to date, first hand reports. Only three WHO employees have been sent to Burma. WHO Geneva headquarters has received no word from them—and literally does not know if they are dead or alive. Many officials in the WHO, the U.S. Public Health Service, and other organizations have been found to be dangerously ill-informed on the situation, with many of them first becoming aware of the extent of the Mandalay outbreak when contacted by IPS reporters this week.

WHO and other authorities have not sufficiently investigated rat outbreaks and other plague epidemics, nor do they have the necessary funds to take action.

Program

The productive resources still exist to reverse the holocaust threatening humanity. Only international action can halt the spread of disease, the growth of rat populations and the general breakdown of the earth's ecology. Rat control and sanitation programs in the advanced countries are essential. **There must be immediate massive increases in such programs in every city.** But by themselves, these programs will not prevent the build-up of an overwhelming disease momentum globally which will soon engulf the advanced sector. Immediately, the weak links in the ecological chain must be repaired. Massive emergency aid must be dispatched to Burma, the region around it, to Brazil and the Sahel. This means above all **food** to increase resistance and

to allow the mobilization of the population in anti-rodent campaigns, and general economic recovery; insecticides to fight the fleas, rodenticides and sanitation programs against the rats; and within months emergency housing programs to begin to turn back the conditions which create holocaust. Within weeks of the beginning of these "weak link programs," food and other aid must be on its way outwards to the Third World as a whole to prevent other disease foci from developing, and to lay the basis for the expansion of food production in the Third World. Simultaneously, the idle productive capacities of the advanced countries must be mobilized to increase food production now. But such mobilization of resources is impossible without immediate implementation of international debt moratoria and creation of new international credit facilities to speed issuance of the necessary credits both for emergency programs and basic development projects.

Speaking for the Atlanticist banking community, Wilhelm Marx of Frankfurt's Sal Oppenheim investment banking

firm, stated this week that "perhaps epidemics are the only solution to overpopulation. It's a biological fact." Such criminals are enemies of the human race, and the fact that they have endorsed a bubonic plague epidemic as part of their debt collection policies ought to be enough to convince frightened waverers that their objections to debt moratoria and the International Development Bank cannot be tolerated one day longer.

Time is short. By mid-May, plague will almost certainly be spreading out of Burma. By late May it will be too late to affect either the spring planting in the Northern hemisphere or to prepare for the fall planting in Argentina, and thus too late to raise 1976 food supplies. By mid-May at the latest, the initial steps in implementing the International Development Bank must be underway. Conversion of industrial capacity to expanded tractor production must be underway, fertilizer, food and emergency supplies must be moving around the globe. Otherwise the Dark Ages will arrive by fall.

Plague Expert: "This is a Calamity"

NEW YORK, April 10 (IPS) — The following are excerpts from an interview conducted this week by a spokesman for the U.S. Labor Party with the plague expert at the U.S. Public Health Service Rat and Plague Monitoring Station in Washington, D.C.

Labor Party: We picked up a report of 40 cases of plague hitting Mandalay, Burma, in the Bangkok Post of March 29. When we checked the report with the World Health Organization's (WHO) main office in Geneva, the plague expert there, Dr. Bytchenko, told us that they have second hand reports of at least 974 cases in Mandalay, presumably all occurring in the last few weeks. However, they said that they have lost all contact with representatives in the area, so that they don't have a clear picture of how the situation is being handled. Have you heard anything on this?

Epidemiologist: No, we haven't heard anything from WHO on this. The communications lines from Third World countries are frequently bad. Countries will often cover up epidemics to protect their commerce and tourist trade. But if Geneva is aware of this kind of a situation, they damn well should let us know. As far as I know, WHO hasn't issued anything on this.

LP: How bad would the Mandalay situation have to get before you would call it "out of hand?"

Epidemiologist: 974 cases means it's already out of hand, especially since you're dealing with an urban situation. An epidemic of this size undoubtedly means progression from the bubonic to the pneumonic form. Pneumonic plague is much more deadly and extremely contagious.

LP: What is the danger of spread to other areas?

Epidemiologist: All of South Asia has a tremendous rat problem. The epidemic could easily spread directly to Rangoon, Bangladesh, India, and beyond.

LP: So even in its present state, the plague epidemic is a threat to the rest of the world?

Epidemiologist: This has to be considered an international calamity.

LP: Doesn't WHO realize this?

Epidemiologist: Sure, but their hands are tied until Burma comes out with a request for international assistance. It's too bad, but that's the way WHO operates.

LP: We're calling congressmen, labor unions, and the press, setting up a cross firing network and directing the pressure on WHO to break the story.

Epidemiologist: That's the way to do it. Once people know what the situation is there'll be such an outrage that WHO will be forced to act. Let's just hope it's not too late.

LP: What's the plague situation in the U.S.?

Epidemiologist: We saw an unusually high rise in the number of cases last year. But the most disturbing thing was the high incidence of conversion from bubonic to the pneumonic form. Of 20 odd cases in the last twelve months, there were four pneumonic cases. This is a higher ratio than I've seen since I started in this field a decade ago. We think that the organism may have changed to a more virulent form, so we want to do virulence studies by testing the plague on primates. So far, though, we can't get any federal funds to do it. It's always this way in public health, you can't get funding to prepare for a problem, you have to wait until it's staring you in the face, but with this one that may be too late.