MINISTRY OF HEALTH
Republic of Liberia

PRESS RELEASE

Discovery of Zaire Ebola Virus in a Bat in Liberia

Monrovia, Thursday, January 24, 2019: As a result of pro-active research by the Liberian Government to determine the cause of the unprecedented Ebola outbreak between 2014 and 2016, Zaire ebolavirus has been found in a cave-dwelling insect-eating bat, a Greater Long-fingered Bat, in Sanniquellie-Mahn Health District, Nimba County.

The source of the 2014-2016 outbreak in the West African region was not definitive, and for this reason, research has been ongoing by the Ministry of Health (MOH), National Public Health Institute of Liberia (NPHIL) to establish whether bats carry Ebola. We have been sampling bats in Liberia for the past 2 years. The infected bat, along with hundreds of other bats, was sampled in late 2016 and tested between June and November 2018. To date, all other bats have tested negative. There is NO known case of Ebola outbreak in Liberia.

The discovery was a collective effort, working in partnership with the MOH, NPHIL, the Forestry Development Authority (FDA), and the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA), with funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Sampling and testing was conducted through the PREDICT project led by EcoHealth Alliance (EHA) and the Society for the Conservation of Nature, Liberia (SCNL).

This finding was the result of a proactive approach by the Government of Liberia to identify the source of the Ebola virus, which is believed to be bats. The discovery is significant because it is the first detection of Zaire ebolavirus in a bat in West Africa and provides important evidence that this particular bat may be a natural host for Ebola. Ongoing studies will examine whether more of this type or other types of bats are infected, and how bats spread the virus. This information will be used to develop strategies to reduce the risk of future outbreaks.

Ongoing investigation will also determine whether or not the discovery is the same strain of the virus as the one that caused the unprecedented 2014-2016 outbreak in West Africa. Zaire ebolavirus can be spread from infected bats to people and from person to person causing Ebola Virus Disease (EVD), and even causing death. The discovery is the first finding of Zaire ebolavirus in a bat in West Africa.

The type of bat that was found carrying Zaire ebolavirus lives in many countries in Africa, including Liberia. Therefore, finding Ebola virus in a bat in Liberia is not surprising. It is likely that Ebola virus may also be found in other countries in Africa where this bat lives.

In Liberia, Zaire ebolavirus was found only in a single bat. Repeat, there are no known cases of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) in people in Liberia at this time.

The Ministry of Health (MOH), the National Public Health Institute of Liberia (NPHIL), and
partners, have heightened surveillance in the country. There is NO case of Ebola reported in Liberia.

However, the public is advised to take the following measures:

1. Avoid hunting bats. Killing bats puts people in direct contact with their dead bodies, blood, faeces and urine and thereby increases the risk of exposure to this virus and other diseases.
2. Always cover your food and water to prevent contact with bats droppings.
3. Avoid direct contact with bats (don’t kill or eat them).
4. Don’t eat bats.
5. Don’t eat fruit that looks like it has been bitten by bats.
6. Killing or removing bats from a local cave or mine has been shown to increase the risk of infection with a virus similar to Ebola. Bats are important for controlling insect pests and pollinating trees. It is better to leave bats alone instead of trying to move or kill them.
7. Call 4455 for more information

Dr. Wilhelmina Ballah
Minister of Health, Liberia

Tolbert G. Nyenswah, LLB, MPH
Director General, NPHIL