

MOST URGENT

Devesh Gupta, Addl DDG
Central Tuberculosis Division
Room No 533-C
Ministry of Health & Family Welfare
Government of India
Nirman Bhawan
New Delhi 110 011

11 June 2018

Subject: Tuberculosis-infected elephants forced to interact with tourists in Jaipur pose a grave threat to public health

Dear Mr Gupta,

I am writing to you from People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) India on behalf of our more than 1 million members and supporters to urge you to direct the Government of Rajasthan to bring an immediate end to interactions between humans and elephants infected with tuberculosis (TB) as well as those who have not yet been tested for TB. We also ask that you provide the infected elephants with immediate veterinary care in order to prevent any further spread of this zoonotic disease, which can be transmitted from animals to humans.

The findings of an April 2018 evaluation report on captive elephants in Jaipur by the Animal Welfare Board of India (AWBI), a statutory body operating under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, revealed that, ten out of 91 captive elephants in Jaipur used for joy rides and other forms of tourist interactions are infected with TB (**Annexure 1**). The AWBI evaluation team included experts, such as senior veterinarians of the Rajasthan Forest and Animal Husbandry departments and other veterinary and wildlife experts. TB can be transmitted to tourists, animal handlers, and the general public. The post-mortem reports for four elephants who died within a period of five months in 2017 indicate that most of the animals had been suffering from respiratory diseases – including possibly TB – and had heavy internal loads of parasites. The AWBI report also states that elephants in Jaipur are particularly at risk of contracting TB because of routine transport within the city and routine interactions with tourists that may expose them to infected humans or elephants as well as because of stress factors, including painful restraining methods, extreme confinement, variable water quality, an inconsistent food supply, and poor nutrition.

We hail the vision of the Honourable Prime Minister for aiming to eliminate TB in India by 2025, which is five years ahead of the global target of 2030. However, the *National Strategic Plan for Tuberculosis Elimination 2017–2025* does not, unfortunately, account for the zoonotic nature of TB transmission or for the prevalence of the disease in animals. Since it's impossible to achieve the complete eradication of the disease in humans without also eradicating it in animals, it's imperative that TB surveillance be conducted in animals, too. It's also necessary that action be taken under the provisions of the law for the treatment, prevention, and control of the disease in animals.

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This is the basic concept of the One Health Initiative, which has been supported and promoted by prominent international organisations such as the World Health Organisation, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, and the World Organisation for Animal Health.

As per a *Hindustan Times* news report dated 24 March 2018 (**Annexure 2**), the experts at the Indian Veterinary Research Institute believe that the prevalence of TB infection is as high as 15 per cent in buffaloes and cows in this country. This news report further states that according to recent research, approximately 9 per cent of all TB infections are transmitted from other animals to humans and that the percentage is higher in TB cases among children.

The study “A Cross-Sectional Study on Prevalence of Bovine Tuberculosis in Indian and Crossbred Cattle in Gangetic Delta Region of West Bengal, India” by Ratan Das *et al.* (**Annexure 3**) concludes, “The findings indicate a higher prevalence of BTB in exotic crossbred animals in Gangetic delta and variation in breed susceptibility, thereby suggesting an urgent review of the present policy on adopting national crossbreeding program and implementation of ‘One Health’ approach.”

An Indian study titled “Serodiagnosis of Tuberculosis in Asian Elephants (*Elephas maximus*) in Southern India: A Latent Class Analysis” by Shalu Verma-Kumar *et al.* (**Annexure 4**) concludes as follows: “Our results provide evidence for high prevalence of asymptomatic *M. tuberculosis* infection in Asian elephants in a captive Indian setting.”

An Indian study titled “Prevalence of Zoonotic Tuberculosis and Associated Risk Factors in Central Indian Populations” by Prachi R Bapat *et al.* (**Annexure 5**) concludes that “[b]ased on the requisite inclusion criteria, we recruited a total of 301 [human] participants whose blood samples were subjected to polymerase chain reaction-based detection and differentiation of *Mycobacterium bovis* and *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. *M. bovis* was detected in 11.4%, 8.9%, and 12.6% of the recruited participants belonging to three distinct population groups (Groups A, B, and C, respectively)”.

Under the Prevention and Control of Infectious and Contagious Diseases in Animals Act, 2009 (Annexure 6), paratuberculosis, the disease caused by the *Mycobacterium avium* subspecies *Paratuberculosis* (*M. paratuberculosis*), and bovine tuberculosis, the disease in cattle caused by *Mycobacterium bovis*, are notifiable and state governments are vested with the responsibility to take necessary and immediate action under the provisions of the law.

It’s imperative to note that the 10 captive elephants in Jaipur who tested positive for TB, as well as those who haven’t been tested for TB, pose a potential threat to humans, including tourists, handlers, the general public, and other animals who interact with them.

Since the Central Tuberculosis Division, under the Directorate General of Health Services, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, is responsible for effective implementation of the *National Strategic Plan for Tuberculosis Elimination 2017–*

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2025, we request that you issue directives to the Government of Rajasthan to quarantine the 10 TB-infected animals immediately, provide for their veterinary care, and ensure that they are not used for rides until they are declared medically fit by a team of qualified veterinarians after a medical examination. We also ask that you direct that the elephants who have not yet been screened for TB be subjected to such testing immediately.

Thank you for your time and attention to this urgent matter.

Kind regards,

Nikunj Sharma
Associate Director of Policy

cc:

1. The Honourable Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India
2. The Honourable Jagat Prakash Nadda, Minister of Health & Family Welfare
3. Smt Preeti Sudan, Secretary, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare

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