New virus extends geographic reach

It can be carried by a mosquito spreading in Europe and North America.

From Authors

The Chikungunya virus, which causes painful and sometimes crippling symptoms, has spread in the last year because it has found a new species of mosquito to carry it, researchers said Friday.

A single mutation increases the potential for Chikungunya to permanently extend its range into Europe and the Americas, Stephen Higgs and colleagues at the University of Texas Medical Branch wrote in the journal PLoS Pathogens.

This is especially true if average temperatures continue to rise with global warming, they wrote. The virus caused outbreaks in India and Italy last year.

Chikungunya is an arbovirus, mosquito-carried by a blood-sucking insect, and was transacted onto mainland by the Aedes aegypti mosquito. It caused an epidemic that began in Kenya in 2004 and spread to several Indian Ocean islands including the Comoros, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar, Mayotte and Reunion.

On tiny Reunion Island alone, more than a third of the population, 360,000 people — were infected, with debilitating aches and pains. It killed 560 people.

Because Aedes aegypti mosquitoes are not found in Reunion, researchers suspected that something else was carrying the virus.

Knowing that the virus that caused the Reunion outbreak had mutated, the researchers tested it to see whether that mutation gave the virus the ability to infect other mosquito species.

They tried to infect various species, including the Asian tiger mosquito, Aedes albopictus, with genetically engineered strains of the virus and found that viruses with the very simple mutation thrived in the tiger mosquitoes.

"This research gives a new insight into how a simple genetic change in a human pathogen can increase its host range and therefore its geographic distribution," the paper said.

"Aedes albopictus is abundant and widely distributed in urban areas of Europe and the United States of America, and Aedes aegypti is also found in many tropical regions, so these two species are now vulnerable to Chikungunya establishment," the authors added.

7 U.S. hurricanes predicted for '08

The Colorado State University hurricane research team predicted that a record 14 tropical storms would develop in the West Pacific, with 7 hurricanes and 4 major hurricanes.

The team, headed by forecasting pioneer William Gray, said the figures would mark next year's hurricane season "some what above average" with the "higher than normal" term average for 10 tropical storms and 6 hurricanes during the six-month season, which starts June 1. The team's long-range forecasts have borne results in the last three years.

Gray's group led by Philip Klotzbuch, said three of next year's hurricanes would be the most dangerous types — Category 3 or above — with winds of at least 111 mph.

30% of land birds may die by 2100

Climate change may cause as many as 30% of birds to become extinct by 2100 because of extreme temperatures and higher levels of carbon dioxide, according to a study.

"Food will be difficult to find so lowlands become warmer and plant and animal species on which birds feed vanish or move to higher elevations," the study says.

The shift will put birds in competition for food with other species over smaller and smaller areas.

States Department watchdog resists amid allegations

Krongard has been accused of thwarting Blackwater inquiries.

By Paul Richter

WASHINGTON — State Department Inspector General Howard Krongard, who has been accused of improperly interfering with investigations into private security contractor Blackwater USA and with other firms, resigned Friday.

In a brief public statement, the longtime corporate lawyer pointed to his recent battles with congressional Democrats and said he explained the reasons for his departure.

"I have decided to step further to say at this time," wrote Krongard, whose job made him the department's chief internal auditor. "In a separate resignation letter to President Bush, he said that he was troubled by "inherent structural and constitutional defects" in the inspector general's position.

He also expressed concern about the "grave threat to public service posed by current record and distracts" among partisans, the government, the media and interest groups.

Krongard, 65, has been accused by current and former members of his staff and by congressional Democrats of giving tips to Blackwater and other security contractors on their alleged abuses of US forces in Iraq and on issues such as US diplomatic immunity.

Rep Henry A Waxman, (D-Berkeley), chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, has accused Krongard of shielding the administration from "any accountability on sensitive issues.

Last month, Krongard, resigned, reversed himself from investigations regarding Blackwater after it was revealed that he was hearing that an investigation was being stalled by the White House.

State Department watchdog resists amid allegations

Krongard has been accused of thwarting Blackwater inquiries.

By Paul Richter

WASHINGTON — State Department Inspector General Howard Krongard, who has been accused of improperly interfering with investigations into private security contractor Blackwater USA and with other firms, resigned Friday.

In a brief public statement, the longtime corporate lawyer pointed to his recent battles with congressional Democrats and said he explained the reasons for his departure.

"I have decided to step further to say at this time," wrote Krongard, whose job made him the department's chief internal auditor. "In a separate resignation letter to President Bush, he said that he was troubled by "inherent structural and constitutional defects" in the inspector general's position.

He also expressed concern about the "grave threat to public service posed by current record and distracts" among partisans, the government, the media and interest groups.

Krongard, 65, has been accused by current and former members of his staff and by congressional Democrats of giving tips to Blackwater and other security contractors on their alleged abuses of US forces in Iraq and on issues such as US diplomatic immunity.

Rep Henry A Waxman, (D-Berkeley), chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, has accused Krongard of shielding the administration from "any accountability on sensitive issues.

Last month, Krongard, resigned, reversed himself from investigations regarding Blackwater after it was revealed that he was hearing that an investigation was being stalled by the White House.

Shuttle managers debate ways to get around fuel gauge glitch

from the Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — NASA delayed the launch of space shuttle Atlantis until at least Sunday as managers debated whether to loosen launch rules to get around fuel gauge problems.

The shuttle was grounded Thursday after a pair of gauges at the bottom of the external fuel tank showed the fuel tank empty, when it was full, according to a routine

Nations fear Ebola epidemic

Uganda has 31 suspected cases of Ebola fever and hundreds more people being monitored, officials said Friday, as fear grew there and in neighboring countries that the deadly virus might spread.

Twenty-two people have died of the fever, said Dr. Emmanuel Okala, minister of health, and university health workers have batten sick. An additional 138 people were being monitored because they came in contact with the infected.

The virus is spread by contact with infected blood and body fluids, and the disease can be treated only with support.

The disease is deadlier than smallpox and has a mortality rate of 50% to 90% in untreated cases. There is no vaccine or specific treatment.

The virus was first identified in 1976 in Zaire, where it kills about 80% of those infected. It is named after the town of EI-Ebri in Sudan where it was discovered.

The virus was first identified in 1976 in Zaire, where it kills about 80% of those infected. It is named after the town of EI-Ebri in Sudan where it was discovered.

The disease has been found in all of the African continent, but the latest outbreak is the first in Uganda.

The disease is spreading to Tanzania and Ethiopia, creating a new threat for the continent and for travelers from尔 China and the United States, where cases were diagnosed in 1995.