

Virus hunters delve into Gabon forest

ZADIE CAVES, Gabon: The scene looks like something out of a science fiction movie, or maybe some dystopian TV series. Six men in yellow biohazard suits clamber in suffocating heat towards a cave in the heart of the Gabonese jungle. Their quest: to unlock new knowledge on how pathogens like coronavirus leap the species barrier to humans.

In the cave is their goal — a colony of bats. “Our job is to look for pathogens which could endanger humans and understand how transmission happens between species,”

explained Gael Maganga, a professor at the University of Franceville.

Bats can be hosts to viruses that do not harm them but can be dangerous to Homo sapiens, often crossing via other animals. COVID-19 is just the latest microbe believed to have taken the zoonotic path from animals to humans. It notably follows three other respiratory viruses, MERS in 2012, SARS in 2003 and H5N1 flu in 1997; the haemorrhagic virus Ebola in 1976; and AIDS, which is believed to have crossed over from chimps

about a century ago, possibly through hunters who handled infected meat.

Bat cave

Getting to the cave is hard work. The team have to almost wade through thick soil, pieces of bark and russet-colored leaves that exhale the musky perfume of the forest. The environment here — hot and humid and filled with natural hazards — is tough for humans, but perfect for viruses.

Bit by bit, the scent of damp earth yields

to the smell of bat droppings, which eventually becomes suffocating in the sticky air. Bees and silvery butterflies dance around the heads of the virus hunters, their faces dripping in sweat beneath their goggles. Above them, the tree tops seem to lose themselves in the sky, and gnarly creepers hang down, as if suspended from the heavens.

The mouth of the cave suddenly rears up ahead, and a stream of bats flies out. A thick white bedding of bat droppings spreads across the ground and the rocks. — AFP

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