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ANALYSIS

Hantavirus strikes cruise ship: 'Perfect storm' or warning?

BY RONG-GONG LIN II
Los Angeles Times

The voyage was marketed for explorers eager to venture to “the edges of the map,” from Antarctica to some of the most remote islands in the world.

It would be a tantalizing trip for tourists with an appetite for adventure — less about trips to the spa and lounging by the pool than a chance to see landscapes few humans have ever laid eyes upon.

But this call of the wild was ultimately among the factors that turned the MV *Hondius* into the epicenter of the first-ever deadly outbreak of hantavirus aboard a modern cruise ship. Eleven cases have been linked to the outbreak so far. Three people are dead, and two others are in intensive care.

The incident — with a few uncomfortable echoes of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic — has sparked concerns and questions. Chief among them: Was this a freak occurrence, or a sign of things to come?

“I think it’s both,” said Dr. Peter Chin-Hong, an infectious diseases expert at UC San Francisco.

Hantavirus had previously been an obscure illness. Typically spread through exposure to infected rodents’ urine and droppings, it’s notoriously difficult to diagnose and has no specified antiviral treatment. It was definitively identified relatively recently, in a field rodent near the Hantan River in South Korea in 1978, and finally explained the mystery cause of the “Korean hemorrhagic fever” that infected thousands of United Nations troops during the Korean War.

Though rare, the disease has drawn attention in the U.S. over the decades due to its incredibly high case-fatality rate: up to 50% among the strains



A white-throated caracara stands on a rock at a municipal landfill in Ushuaia, Tierra del Fuego province, Argentina, on May 14, 2026. A team of Argentine scientists will travel to the southern port city of Ushuaia to determine whether hantavirus is present there.

that circulate in the Americas.

Western Hemisphere hantavirus strains are so deadly because they can attack the lungs and make them leak. The strains that circulate in Asia and Europe — where hantavirus is more common, and generally less deadly — attack the kidneys.

Those who are severely ill can only be treated by putting them on life-support machines that directly add oxygen to their blood.

Despite its severity, the overall impact of the disease in the Americas has remained muted for two main reasons. First, most strains of hantavirus do not spread directly from person to person. And second, many people will not come into contact with rodents carrying the virus during their daily lives.

Excursions that attract people like those aboard the *MV Hondius*, however, blur the second line. Launched in 2019, the ice-strengthened vessel offered passengers opportunities for “maximum contact with the nature

and wildlife you traveled so far to see,” according to its operator, Oceanwide Expeditions.

“The broader pattern is definitely not random,” Chin-Hong said, “which is more expedition tourism visiting remote areas.” Climate change, he added, is also increasing the range of certain infectious diseases.

“The hantavirus in the cruise ship is unprecedented, and reflects kind of like a perfect storm of the expedition cruise through a remote area, environmental exposure potentially during a short excursion, and the hantavirus — this particular Andes virus — being capable of going from person to person,” he said.

The Andes virus, which circulates in Argentina and Chile and is mainly spread among the long-tailed pygmy rice rat, is the only hantavirus strain known to be able to transmit from human to human.

Such inter-person spread occurred previously in a deadly outbreak in Argentina. From Novem-

ber 2018 through February 2019, the Andes virus infected 34 people there, killing 11, according to a study in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

There were 149 passengers and staff aboard the *MV Hondius* when the ship publicly disclosed that three of its passengers had died. Of the 18 U.S. citizens on the ship, one passenger initially tested positive for hantavirus overseas but also got a negative test result; a follow-up test is now being done in the U.S., and results are expected in a day or so, Dr. David Fitter, incident manager for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s hantavirus response, told reporters in a briefing Wednesday.

That patient, who is not ill, is being monitored at a biocontainment unit at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

Five California residents have been potentially exposed to the virus — four aboard the cruise ship, and the fifth while on a plane with an infected person in South Africa. All

five are asymptomatic and appear healthy, the California Department of Public Health said Wednesday.

Most infected people actually don’t seem to spread the Andes virus, Chin-Hong said. But some do end up being “super-spreaders,” infecting others at exceptional rates.

That’s what happened in 2018-19. A single person got the Andes virus from a rodent, and the outbreak was spread mainly by three sick people who attended crowded social events, the medical journal study said — including a birthday party and a wake for one of the hantavirus victims.

In the case of the *MV Hondius*, the first person believed to have contracted the hantavirus was a man from the Netherlands who was possibly exposed to rodents while bird-watching prior to boarding the ship before it left for its transatlantic journey, according to authorities. He had spent the prior three months traveling through Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, the World Health Organization said. The man boarded the ship on April 1, developed symptoms on April 6 and died on board on April 11.

“At present, the thought is that it was an ornithologist who was visiting a dump, where many rare birds congregate, and was exposed to a rodent that was in the garbage dump,” said Dr. Elizabeth Hudson, regional physician chief of infectious diseases for Kaiser Permanente Southern California.

From there, she said, the realities of cruising at sea set the stage.

“Cruise ships are a perfect environment for the spread of infectious diseases, unfortunately,” Hudson said. “You have a population of people who are living together in a relatively small and confined space, with most folks spending a good part of their time indoors eating and socializing. This means that if there’s an infection that can spread easily from person to person, the very nature of the cruise ship allows this to happen more readily.”

It can also be difficult to

isolate sick people aboard a cruise ship. The *MV Hondius*’ doctor fell ill with hantavirus, as did another crew member who was working as a guide. Among the symptoms people reported were gastrointestinal illness, fever, general malaise, pneumonia, fatigue, aches and respiratory symptoms.

Extensive spread of the hantavirus outbreak is not expected, health experts say. Unlike COVID-19, the Andes virus is much harder to transmit from person to person.

In past outbreaks of the Andes virus, taking steps like isolating people who are sick — and asking those who aren’t sick but have been exposed to stay away from others — have brought outbreaks to an end.

It can take up to six weeks from the time a person has been exposed to the virus to the onset of illness. That “takes us to the 21st of June,” WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said at a news briefing Tuesday. “WHO’s recommendation is that they should be monitored actively at a specified quarantine facility or at home for 42 days from the last exposure.”

Despite concerns surrounding this latest outbreak, the Andes virus is considered a poor candidate to become the next pandemic. One thing that makes COVID spread so easily is that people can infect others even if they’re not personally experiencing symptoms.

With COVID, people could get sick just by breathing in aerosolized viral particles floating around and pushed across an entire room by an air conditioning vent.

With the Andes virus, by contrast, people probably need to be symptomatic to spread illness.

The 2018-19 Andes virus outbreak in Argentina also showed that close contact is needed for transmission, including “being seated very close” to the sick person, Chin-Hong said.

More morbidly, health experts note, the Andes virus is also too deadly for it to spread rapidly in a pandemic situation.

FROM PAGE 1A

MAP RULING

the same day as the August primary elections — to determine whether the campaign collected enough signatures to reach the Nov. 3 ballot.

If Hoskins determines that the campaign has enough signatures, the map would then be retroactively suspended back to Dec. 9, the day the campaign filed its initial paperwork, the court found. In other words, the new, gerrymandered map would be blocked — and has been blocked — until Missourians have a chance to vote on it in November.

That stark acknowledgment creates several chaotic and dueling scenarios, including the possibility that one map could be used in August and another one in November. It could also open the door for a post-election chal-

lenge if the gerrymandered map is blocked but used in the August primaries.

A social media account for Missouri Senate Democrats emphasized the chaos in a series of social media posts throughout Tuesday and Wednesday.

“Yesterday, the Missouri Supreme Court said ‘it is impossible to say’ if the GOP’s gerrymandered map is in effect, it probably won’t be later, and at that point, it means it never was,” the post said.

For some Democrats, the ruling also ushered in a rare moment of hope amid the protracted redistricting fight.

“There is a clear path to victory for my re-election, as has been reflected in the more than 305,000 Missourians who joined the citizens’ led refer-



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Rep. Emanuel Cleaver speaks during a meeting of the Advisory Committee for the 18th and Vine Streetcar Expansion at Zhou B Art Center Kansas City on Monday, Sept. 22, 2025.

endum petition, which I am confident will receive a certificate of sufficiency,” Cleaver said in a statement Tuesday evening.

Pressure is now mounting on Hoskins to immediately certify the referendum for the ballot as he faces accusations of slow-

walking his certification. Data posted on the Secretary of State’s Office website has confirmed that the campaign collected more than enough valid signatures to qualify for the ballot.

“I think the secretary is intentionally trying to create chaos by intention-

ally delaying the certification decision,” said Chuck Hatfield, an attorney for the referendum campaign.

But Hoskins, who has repeatedly championed the new map, told reporters on Tuesday he planned to complete his certification process “by Aug. 4.” He then went a step further and said he had questions about the legality of the referendum, a remarkable suggestion that he could decide the referendum is insufficient for the ballot even though the campaign collected enough signatures.

“I do question whether there can be a referendum process on (congressional

redistricting),” Hoskins said.

As all eyes turn to Hoskins, whatever he decides is virtually certain to spark another raft of lawsuits that could determine whether the gerrymandered map is used in the August and November elections. For now, map opponents are urging him to do his job and decide whether the referendum can reach the ballot.

“The secretary has the ability to declare sufficient or insufficient People Not Politicians’ signatures today,” said Hatfield.

“That would alleviate a lot of the questions and ambiguity that we have.”

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