



World Organisation
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Fifth Meeting of the South Asia Rabies Laboratory Network (SA-RABNET)

Wednesday, 13 May 2026, MS Teams, 3 PM Japan Time (GMT+9)

**(10:30 am Kabul; 11 am Islamabad; 11:30 am Colombo and New Delhi;
11:45 am Kathmandu; 12 pm Dhaka and Thimphu)**

MEETING REPORT



Photo credit: Kinzang Dukpa

Report prepared by: Kinzang Dukpa, WOAHR RAP (Secretariat of SA-RABNET)



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SUMMARY

The World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) Regional Representation for Asia and the Pacific (RRAP) in collaboration with Karnataka Veterinary Animal and Fisheries Sciences University (KVAFSU), India, organized the **Fifth Meeting of the South Asia Rabies Laboratory Network (SA-RABNET)** on 13 May 2026. A total of 31 attendees, including 12 Network Members (see annexure 1) from seven South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Members (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) attended the meeting.

The meeting focused on:

- Progress updates from Member States since October 2025
- Follow-up actions from the 4th SA-RABNET meeting
- Updates from WOAH and KVAFSU
- A technical session on **“Rabies beyond borders: wildlife–domestic interface”**

Key discussions highlighted:

- Continued challenges in rabies surveillance, diagnostics, vaccines, and workforce capacity
- Increasing recognition of the **wildlife–domestic interface in rabies transmission**
- Strong need for **laboratory capacity strengthening, proficiency testing, and molecular diagnostics**
- Importance of **regional collaboration**, including through SAARC mechanisms

The meeting agreed on continued collaboration, strengthening data sharing, and exploring regional mechanisms such as vaccine banks and coordinated laboratory support.

Dr Barun Sharma from Nepal as the incumbent Chair, chaired the 5th Network meeting of SA-RABNET.

BACKGROUND

To achieve the global goal of elimination of dog-mediated human rabies by 2030, an important component to focus on is the surveillance of animal rabies to provide accurate data in countries for timely and appropriate control measures. Although rabies poses significant public health concerns in South Asia, there is a general lack of ground-level surveillance owing primarily to insufficient or total lack of rabies diagnostic capacity across the region.

Since 2020, to support capacity building for rabies diagnosis and surveillance in animals in South Asia, WOAHRAP jointly with the KVAFSU-WOAH Reference Laboratory for Rabies in India organised [virtual training on brain sampling and diagnosis of rabies](#) in animals in 2020, [rabies serology in 2021](#) for the SAARC Member States.

As a follow up to the virtual trainings and as per the demands of the Members, WOAHRAP and KVAFSU jointly organised a virtual workshop on “[Proposed South Asia Rabies Laboratory Network](#)” on 14 July 2022 to introduce the concept of establishing a sub-regional rabies laboratory Network for South Asia to strengthen rabies diagnosis, surveillance, and control. Further, as a follow up of the virtual workshop, WOAHRAP asked the countries for nomination of two Members to initiate the activities of the Network in accordance with the proposed ToR. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka have nominated Members of the Network. The first meeting of the Network was held on 6 April 2023 to formally launch the South Asia Rabies Laboratory Network and discuss the scope and activities to be implemented by the Network. Bhutan chaired the first three meetings of the Network supported by Nepal as the Co-Chair. The Third and Fourth Network Meetings held on 3rd March and 29 October 2025, were chaired by Nepal as the current Chair of the Network supported by Sri Lanka as the Co-Chair.

The 5th meeting aimed to:

- Review progress since the 4th meeting (October 2025)
- Share country updates on rabies diagnosis, surveillance, and control
- Strengthen regional coordination and technical exchange
- Discuss emerging technical issues, particularly wildlife involvement

OUTCOME OF THE MEETING

OPENING REMARKS

Dr Kinzang Dukpa, Regional One Health Coordinator, WOAHRAP, welcomed participants and introduced the meeting objectives and key topics to be covered. Dr Tomoko Ishibashi, WOAHRAP Regional Representative for Asia and Pacific appreciated the efforts made by the Members in keeping the forum alive and acknowledged some notable outputs from the Network activities such as the development of Standard Operating Protocols (SOPs) for sample referral by Members to WOAHRAP Reference Laboratory; capacity building support for diagnosis and surveillance by the WOAHRAP Reference laboratory and discussion on technical topics such as oral rabies vaccination, interlaboratory proficiency testing, and molecular diagnostic techniques. She reminded the urgency of achieving the **“Zero by 2030”** rabies elimination goal and the need to strengthen surveillance, vaccination, and data sharing. Dr. R. Nagaraj, Dean of Veterinary College, KVAFSU, stressed the importance of scientific collaboration and diagnostic capacity building and reiterated commitment from the WOAHRAP Reference Laboratory (RL) in Bengaluru. Mr Tanvir Ahmed, Director of SAARC Secretariat, Kathmandu, elaborated on specific areas where SAARC could actively support Member States in strengthening rabies control. He highlighted the importance of utilising existing regional coordination mechanisms such as the Chief Veterinary Officers (CVO) Meeting, the SAARC Laboratory Directors Forum, and the Epidemiology Network (EpiNet) to facilitate regular exchange of information, harmonisation of laboratory practices, and coordinated response to transboundary rabies risks. He emphasized that rabies is being proposed for inclusion in the agenda of the upcoming SAARC CVO Meeting in Colombo (June 2026), providing a critical opportunity for Member States to collectively discuss regional priorities, gaps, and collaborative action plans.

Adoption of the Agenda

The meeting agenda was adopted following introduction by the Chair.

Review of Previous Meeting (4th SA-RABNET)

Dr Kinzang highlighted the key discussion and follow-up points from the 4th meeting held in October 2025:

Need for diagnostic capacity and reagents

Participation in proficiency testing

Expansion of molecular diagnostics

Addressing wildlife rabies and transboundary risks

Progress was reported and further discussed under country updates.

Members' updates on follow-up actions since the 4th SA-RABNET and other recent actions/progress on rabies diagnosis, prevention and control activities

The Chair invited the Members of the Network to share their country updates since the last Network meeting.

Afghanistan

Dr Hamidullah Tawfiq and Dr. Abdullah Safi joined the meeting. Afghanistan reported testing of 16 brain samples at the national laboratory using rapid tests and PCR and all samples tested negative. They have not introduced new brain sampling techniques and diagnostic techniques since October 2025. They have also not referred samples outside the country. They reported undertaking rabies surveillance activities in 16 provinces and training provincial staff about how to collect rabies sample and submission of rabies suspect samples to central laboratory. Afghanistan highlighted multiple constraints affecting rabies control, including limited diagnostic capacity, lack of reagents (DFA conjugates and LFA kits), and inability to conduct advanced diagnostics such as fluorescence testing due to reagent shortages. The country also noted challenges in sample shipment to reference laboratories, preventing participation in molecular analysis and proficiency testing.

Afghanistan is currently awaiting for supplies of lateral flow assays (LFAs) that KVAFSU is planning to send following the 4th SA-RABNET meeting outcomes.

Bangladesh

Dr. Kamal Mushtofa, Dr Md. Sohel Rana, Dr Md. Mahbubul Islam, and Dr Ashis Kundu joined the meeting. Bangladesh reported testing about 20 animal and human (saliva) samples with low positivity. They have expanded field PCR capacity in two regional laboratories and mass dog vaccination have resumed in selected districts. Some of the ongoing challenges include funding limitations for national vaccination and delayed approval of national rabies strategy.

They requested capacity building on sampling and diagnostics. Bangladesh also highlighted delays in approval of the IBCM guideline, limiting its regional sharing. Bangladesh reported that financial constraints have significantly affected national mass dog vaccination (MDV) programmes, leading to interruption of routine vaccination activities and a slight increase in human rabies deaths.

It was clarified that it is not recommended to do saliva testing for rabies diagnosis given that virus secretions occur intermittently. If needed, saliva needs to be collected at regular intervals (1-2 hours) to increase the sensitivity of the test.

Bhutan

Dr Tshering Choden from the National Centre for Animal Health under the Department of Livestock (DOL) represented Bhutan. During the reporting period, Bhutan tested 20 samples of which three were positive against rabies. They have established direct fluorescent antibody (DFA) capacity in two regional laboratories and they continue vaccination in high-risk border areas with strong surveillance and reporting system. Bhutan seeks technical support for proficiency testing.

India

Dr Durlav Bora, Dr Jyoti Misri, Dr Swapna Susan Abraham, Dr Sharada, Dr Isloor, Dr Kavya and other KVAFSU staff participated from India. Dr. Sharada shared updates since October 2025 and reported that over 1,200 samples were tested across several laboratories in India with high positivity rate. There were expanded wildlife rabies testing (e.g., bears, jackals, civets). Training training programs were held nationwide with strong strong integration with human health sector. There are ongoing research on vaccines and diagnostics.

Nepal

Dr Barun Sharma, Dr Pragya Koirala, Dr Anil Regmi, and Dr Sujan Rana joined from the Department of Livestock Services of Nepal. Dr Anil informed that around 193 samples were tested with high positivity rate (~80%). They have expanded DFA and PCR capacity in sub-national laboratories with designation of the Regional laboratory at Dhangadi as the National Reference Laboratory for Rabies in Nepal. Major challenges faced included vaccine production challenges

with lack of access to quality rabies vaccine seed strains, limited capacity for vaccine quality testing, and cold chain management challenges affecting vaccine deployment. Nepal requests for support for proficiency testing and vaccine seed supply.

Pakistan

Dr Muhammad Abubakar and Dr Samar Khan attended and updated Pakistan's status of rabies control and progress. Pakistan reports annual human deaths between 2,000 and 5,000 with 99% originating from dog bites. The free-roaming dog population is large with cities reporting several dog bites in a day. Most rabies control activities are undertaken in cities whereas it is largely neglected in the rural areas. The animal health sector is relatively weak in terms of disease surveillance and vaccination. There is limited diagnostic capacity and fragmented surveillance. Pakistan reported major structural challenges, including a large unmanaged stray dog population (~2.5 million), limited funding, and fragmented surveillance and diagnostic systems. Additional challenges include weak cold chain systems, decentralised governance, and limited coordination across sectors.

However, with the Pandemic Fund project under implementation, they expect some activities on dog rabies control to be included with the project activities.

Sri Lanka

Dr W. M. A. D. Wanninayake (Anushika), Dr Pradeep Lakpriya, and Dr E. R. R. Wimalasinghe attended the meeting. Dr Anushika informed that during the period, around 459 animal brain samples were tested out of which 99 were positive. They are expanding field diagnostics using LFA at district level. Through support of WOAHA and the WOAHA RL for Rabies in India, 26 veterinarians working in animal health and human sectors were trained on WOAHA-recommended animal brain sampling and diagnostic tests such as LFA, DFA, direct rapid immunohistochemistry (DrIT) and molecular tests. Fifty-four participants representing human and animal sectors were trained on mass dog vaccination concepts, methods and tools. The MDV training was organised by WOAHA RRAP together with Mission Rabies (WVS) with logistical support of the Department of Animal Production and Health. Sri Lanka requested continued support for capacity for disease diagnosis, training of workforce for MDV and surveillance, and proficiency testing of laboratories.

It was clarified that WOAHA does not recommend brain samples testing using negri bodies test as we now have more sensitive and specific tests such as DFA and PCR.

Updates from WOAHA RRAP

Dr Kinzang Dukpa shared information on the recent national trainings on **mass dog vaccination and dog handling** back-to-back with national training of trainers on rabies diagnosis conducted in Sri Lanka in February 2026. These capacity building initiatives were taken in collaboration and jointly with Mission Rabies (WVS), the WOAHA RL for Rabies in India, DAPH and University of

Peradeniya. He also informed about the new resource on **dog population estimation methodologies** developed by the United Against Rabies that is available on the UAR website. WOAHP also provided a presentation on the process for application to WOAHP for the WOAHP endorsement of official rabies control programme for Bhutan.

Updates from KVAFSU

Dr Sharada made the updates as follows:

- ☐ Continued training and capacity building for SAARC countries
- ☐ Progress on:
 - Oral rabies vaccine development
 - Molecular diagnostics and research
- ☐ Work underway on **proficiency testing accreditation (ISO 17043)**
- ☐ Encouraged countries to:
 - Send brain samples for molecular analysis
 - Participate in training programs

There were several other activities undertaken by KVAFSU to support initiatives on rabies control in India including providing training, participating in academic seminars, research workshops, awareness programmes and advocacy using various platform. Several publications have been made by scientists and researchers from KVAFSU on rabies.

Technical presentations

“Rabies beyond borders: wildlife–domestic interface”

Dr Isloor presented in detail the situation, epidemiology, and significance of rabies in wildlife and at the interface with domestic animals in terms of rabies control in South Asia. The topic was chosen based in increasing incidences of rabies reported in wild animals in many countries in South Asia and the need to understand the way forward in addressing threat posed by rabies in wildlife to animals and humans.

Key messages from the presentation:

- Increasing evidence of rabies in wildlife (jackals, foxes, wolves, etc.)
- Transmission occurs via **spillover and spillback between dogs and wildlife**
- No strong evidence yet of a separate sylvatic cycle in South Asia

- Major risk factors:
 - Urbanisation and habitat encroachment
 - Shared resources (water, waste)
 - Free-roaming dog populations
- Recommendations:
 - Strengthen wildlife surveillance
 - Enhance molecular epidemiology
 - Explore oral rabies vaccination strategies

Table 1. Key issues and follow up actions

Topics/issues	Follow-ups
a. Limited access to quality rabies vaccines and vaccine seed strains	• Explore SAARC regional vaccine bank • Facilitate access to quality-assured vaccines and seed strains • Strengthen vaccine quality testing capacity
b. Fragmented and limited diagnostic and surveillance capacity across countries	• Scale up laboratory capacity (DFA, PCR) • Provide capacity building and standardized diagnostic protocols considering staff attrition in many countries • Strengthen field surveillance systems - Expand use of LFA and brain sampling techniques • Increase training of frontline veterinarians
c. Sample shipment challenges	• Develop regional mechanism for sample shipment. • Engage SAARC and partners for logistical and funding support • Implement SOPs already shared • Identify alternative courier solutions
d. Wildlife rabies surveillance	• Strengthen wildlife rabies surveillance • Conduct molecular studies to understand transmission dynamics • Explore oral rabies vaccination strategies
e. Proficiency testing	• Accelerate establishment of PT schemes (via KVAFSU) - Encourage member participation • Use PT results to improve laboratory performance
f. Funding constraints, harmonized regional strategy	• Use SAARC platform to promote coordinated regional approach for rabies control. • SAARC to explore funding regional capacity building for rabies control and dog vaccination

g. Regional coordination mechanisms	• Continue use of WOAHA's SA-RABNET platform • Use SAARC platforms (CVO, EpiNet, Lab forums) - Harmonise national strategies - Promote cross-border collaboration
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Next Meeting of the SA-RABNET

- 👍 The **6th SA-RABNET meeting** will be held in **November 2026 (tentative)**
- 👍 Proposed transition of Chairmanship to **Sri Lanka** (subject to confirmation)

Closing of the SA-RABNET Meeting

The Chair thanked all participants for their contributions and emphasised:

- Continued collaboration under the One Health framework
- Strengthening laboratory networking across South Asia
- Maintaining momentum toward rabies elimination goals

WOAH RRAP and partners reiterated their commitment to supporting Member States.

MEETING MATERIALS

The agenda and presentations are available at the WOAHA Regional Representation website at:

https://rr-asia.woah.org/en/?post_type=event&p=28734&preview=true

Annexure 1. Meeting participants

Members	Name	Designation and Affiliation	Remarks
Participants from the countries of South Asia			
Afghanistan	Dr Mohammad Ibrahim Froten	Head of Epidemiology Department	Apologies
	Dr Hamidullah Tawfiqe	Head, Diagnosis Laboratory, General Directorate of Animal Health and Production	Attended
	Dr. Abdullah Safi	WOAH Wildlife Focal Point of Afghanistan	As an observer
Bangladesh	Dr. Md. Mostofa Kamal	Director of Research, Training, and Evaluation at the Livestock Research Institute, Department of Livestock Services, Dhaka	Attended
	Dr Md Golam Azam Chowdhury	Principal Scientific Officer Central Disease Investigation Laboratory Department of Livestock Services	Apologies
	Dr Md Sohel Rana	Focal Point: One Health and Rabies Senior Scientific Officer & Staff Officer to DG Department of Livestock Services (DLS)	Attended (as an observer)
	Dr Md Mahbubul Islam	Principal Scientific Officer at Livestock Research Institute (LRI), Dhaka.	Observer
Bhutan	Dr Lungten	Officiating Program Director National Centre for Animal Health Department of Livestock	Apologies
	Dr Nirmal Kumar Thapa	Head, Laboratory Services Unit National Centre for Animal Health Department of Livestock	Apologies



Members	Name	Designation and Affiliation	Remarks
	Dr Tshering Choden	Laboratory Services Unit National Centre for Animal Health Department of Livestock	Attended
India	Dr Jyoti Misri	Principal Scientist Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare	Attended
	Dr Swapna Susan Abraham	Deputy Director (Retired) State Institute for Animal Diseases, Animal Husbandry Department, Kerala	Attended
	Dr Durlav Prasad Bora	Department of Microbiology Assam Agriculture University	Attended
Nepal	Dr Barun Kumar Sharma	Central Veterinary Laboratory	Attended
	Dr Pragya Koirala	Senior Veterinary Officer, Central Veterinary Laboratory	Attended
	Dr Anil Regmi	Central Veterinary Laboratory	Attended
	Dr Sujana Rana	DLS (Observer)	Attended as observer
Pakistan	Dr Khurshid Ahmad	Director General National Veterinary Laboratory	Apologies
	Dr Ali Raza Nizamani	Senior Research Officer (Virology) Central Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory, Sindh Province	Apologies
	Dr Muhammad Abubakar	Senior scientific officer National Veterinary Laboratory, NARC Gate 2, Park Road Islamabad, Pakistan	Attended
Sri Lanka	Dr E. R. R. Wimalasinghe	Veterinary Investigation Officer Department of Animal Production and Health	Attended
	Dr W. M. A. D. Wanninayake	Veterinary Research Officer	Attended



Members	Name	Designation and Affiliation	Remarks
		Department of Animal Production and Health	
	Dr Pradeep Lakpriya	Department of Animal Production and Health	Attended as an observer
Organisers			
Karnataka Veterinary Animal & Fisheries Sciences University	Dr Shrikrishna Isloor	Professor and Laboratory Director, WOAHO Reference Laboratory for Rabies Veterinary College, KVAFSU	Attended
	Dr Sharada Ramakrishnaiah	Associate Professor and Quality Manager, WOAHO Reference Laboratory for Rabies, Veterinary College, KVAFSU	Attended
	Dr Kavya Other staff from KVAFSU	Veterinary College, KVAFSU, Bengaluru	Attended
WOAH	Dr Tomoko Ishibashi	Regional Representative, WOAHO RRAP	Attended
	Dr Kinzang Dukpa	Regional One Health Coordinator, WOAHO RRAP	Attended
	Basilio Valdehuesa	Regional Communication Officer, WOAHO RRAP	Observer
	Genta Kawai		
	Samuel Castro		
	Pondpan Suwanthada		
	Jacqueline Lusat		
Partners			
SAARC Secretariat, Kathmandu	Mr Tanvir Ahmed Torophder	Director (ARD & SDF), SAARC Secretariat, Kathmandu Nepal	Observer



Members	Name	Designation and Affiliation	Remarks
SAARC Agriculture Centre, Dhaka	Dr Md. Yunus Ali	Senior Programme Specialist (Livestock & AMR), SAC, Dhaka	Observer

Annexure 2. Agenda

Topics	Speaker	Japan Time (+9 GMT)	Duration
Opening remarks	Dr Tomoko Ishibashi , Regional Representative, WOAHP Regional Representation for Asia and the Pacific Dr R. Nagaraj , Dean, Veterinary College, KVAFSU, Bengaluru. Dr Tanvir Ahmad Torophder , Director, SAARC Secretariat, Kathmandu.	3 PM	15 min
Adoption of agenda and group photo	Dr Barun Sharma, Chair, SA-RABNET	3:15	5 min
Key outputs from the 4 th SA-RABNET Meeting	Dr Kinzang Dukpa, WOAHP RRAP	3:20	5 min
Members' key updates since the 4 th SA-RABNET and other recent actions/progress on rabies diagnosis, prevention and control activities	All Members in alphabetical order (5 mins each x 7) Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka	3:25	35 min
KVAFSU and WOAHP's updates	- Dr. Sharada, R., KVAFSU - Dr Kinzang Dukpa, WOAHP	4:00	10 min
Discussion	Chair	4:10	10 min
Health break/ Intermission		4:20	10 min
Technical topic of discussion "Rabies Beyond Borders: Unraveling the Wildlife–Domestic Interface"	Dr Shrikrishna Isloor, KVAFSU	4:30	15 min
Q&A and Discussion	Chair	4:45	10 min
AOB	Chair	4:55	10 min
Discussion and wrap-up	Chair	5:00	5 min

Note: KVAFSU – Karnataka Veterinary, Animal and Fisheries Sciences University (WOAHP Reference Laboratory for Rabies in India); WOAHP RRAP – World Organisation for Animal Health Regional Representation for Asia and the Pacific, Tokyo Japan.