

Thousands of pet birds die during airline transit

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THOUSANDS of wild birds have died in horrific conditions on four airline flights since January, the British-based Environmental Investigation Agency has revealed.

As a result, the agency — backed by the RSPCA — is calling for a crackdown on the wild bird trade when animal welfare groups and traders meet officials from the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (Cites) in London this week.

Pressure is mounting on governments to halt high death

rates among birds brought to Europe and the US as pets, after four European airlines, including BA, banned shipments from African countries.

In December, Britain stepped up pressure on airlines after a government report revealed that 13 per cent of the 200,000 wild birds which entered Britain in 1988 had died on the flight or in quarantine.

But the latest incidents revealed by the EIA show flagrant disregard by suppliers, airlines and government officials worldwide of international welfare regulations designed to protect birds during transport.

■ On 5 September, 1,300 of a shipment of 8,400 rare birds including lovebirds, parrots and hornbills, bound for the US from Tanzania, were found dead of starvation and suffocation at Nairobi airport.

■ In August, seven of nine pelicans shipped into Holland by KLM died of asphyxia.

■ In March, 60 of 640 nightingales exported from Hong Kong were found dead at Brussels.

■ In January, bad packaging and dehydration caused the deaths of 1,200 of 5,800 birds, stopped in The Netherlands and Belgium en route from Pakistan and Mali to France.

Tough Cites welfare rules already exist, but they are widely ignored by governments.

But increasing concern by responsible airlines over high death rates has led British Airways to ban wild bird shipments from Tanzania and Senegal, while Swissair has banned all tropical bird shipments and KLM and Lufthansa have suspended all such shipments into Heathrow.

The EIA will call for tougher Cites regulations when the convention's animal transportation working group, chaired by the UK Department of the Envi-

ronment, meets on Thursday. The group wants restricted ports of entry for wildlife shipments, rules obliging member countries to monitor mortality rates, and an agreement to allow independent animal welfare groups to help check shipments.

Mr Peter Knights of EIA said: 'The sheer scale of the trade, compared to the tightly limited resources trying to police it, means loopholes exist and countries fail in their obligations. If more species are not to become severely endangered by exploitation, the UK must support an end to the trade.'

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'There are examples of...