

Rats recruited to hunt for TB in Mozambique

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A swarm of trained rats is on its way to Mozambique to help the country's over-stretched health system detect tuberculosis in patients, officials said Friday.

The authorities have enlisted the much-maligned rodents to help sniff out the disease, after Mozambique's first lady learned of their success in neighbouring Tanzania.

"We had a request from the first Lady and then the Minister of Health who wanted to replicate our results," Mozambique's programme manager for Belgian NGO Apopo, Tess Tewelde, told AFP.

The organisation is in the process of building a laboratory in the Mozambican capital, Maputo, where the rats will be used to sniff their way through sputum samples from patients suspected of having the disease.

These are no ordinary household rats, but "giant pouched rats" native to sub-Saharan Africa, prized for their extraordinary [sense of smell](#).

For the past six years, Apopo has been using what they call their "hero rats" to sniff out [land mines](#) in Mozambique left over from its civil and independence wars with great success. "What takes a de-miner two days to clear, rats do in 30 minutes," Tewelde said.

Now the rodents will turn their attention to the country's new threat - tuberculosis, often associated with [HIV infection](#) in a sub-continent

plagued by the [AIDS epidemic](#).

The disease affects six people out of every 1,000 people according to 2008 UN figures. Half of all [TB cases](#) go undetected according to the country's [health ministry](#) statistics.

Rats can help to bring these numbers down because of their speed and accuracy, Apopo said.

They can accomplish in under an hour, what a laboratory technician can accomplish in a week, said Tewelde.

"It is much cheaper and faster. Our rats can screen 400 samples in 30 minutes.

"In TB, it is important not to miss a patient. Imagine how many they can contaminate in their family and community," said Tewelde.

By the end of the year, Apopo hopes to be using around 50 giant rats for both mine-detection and TB detection—though not using the same individual animals.

"You cannot use them interchangeably. They need special training," Tewelde said, adding the young rats would probably need some time to adapt to their new home in Maputo. "They get panicked at the beginning," he told AFP.

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