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More urged to guard against SARS comeback

By SHAN JUAN

More needs to be done to prepare for a possible comeback of the deadly SARS virus, Chinese and German scientists urged in Beijing yesterday.

"The key task now is to get well prepared for possible outbreaks of SARS or other viruses," said Rolf Hilgenfeld, a structural biologist at the University of Lübeck in Germany, at a meeting in the capital to close the four-year Sino-European Project on SARS Diagnostics and Antivirals.

The SARS virus caused widespread panic and killed about 800 people worldwide in 2003.

While the scourge has been contained, Hilgenfeld warned that "the epidemic clock is clicking, but we don't know the exact time".

The scientists urged decision makers worldwide to boost support for a long-term, sustainable, and rational antiviral research to fight SARS.

As part of such efforts to prepare for a comeback of SARS, Chinese and German scientists also announced the

development of five compounds that have proven to be effective against the virus.

The five compounds, thought to be crucial in the search for an anti-SARS drug, were the result of a 2 million euros (\$3.14 million) project between the Chinese and German governments.

"In case of a SARS outbreak in the future, they are available for use at once," Hilgenfeld said.

Jiang Hualiang, deputy director of the Shanghai Institute of Materia Medica of the Chinese Academy of Sciences who led

the project, said the compounds would be stocked at his institute for possible drug development in the future.

The stock would also help enhance knowledge of the SARS virus and other viruses including the ongoing H5N1 bird flu virus, Hilgenfeld said.

"The project, thereafter, is highly significant despite the SARS outbreak having been contained," he said.

"The useful data from the project will also help with the development of a broad spectrum antiviral drug," Hilgenfeld said.