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July 28, 2010, 5:44 PM

In the War on Bedbugs, a New Attack Strategy

By JAVIER C. HERNANDEZ

Bedbugs, the seed-size insects that have invaded mattresses, couches and laundry baskets everywhere, are now officially on New York City's hit list.

With the bravado of military commandos, city officials on Wednesday declared war on bedbugs (see [battle plan](#), also below), known in scientific parlance as *Cimex lectularius*, which have exploded in number in New York and major cities across the world over the past several decades.



Robert Stolarik for The New York Times
A bedbug-infested apartment in Brooklyn in 2006.

The population of bedbugs has grown so much in New York that officials recorded 33,772 bug-related inquiries to its 311 help line last year, a 54 percent increase from 2008. In a recent survey, 6.7 percent of adults in the city reported battling the insects over the last year.

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City Councilwoman Gale Brewer, described by City Council Speaker [Christine C. Quinn](#) as the “woman bedbugs should fear” for her efforts to crack down on the uprising, said the city was working to erase the stigma of the creatures. Even the city’s richest man, Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#), has confronted the problem, Ms. Brewer said.

“He told me, ‘Gale, all my friends have bedbugs; what am I going to do?’ ” Ms. Brewer said. “It doesn’t matter if you’re rich or if you’re poor or if you’re middle class. You have bedbugs.”

As part of its \$500,000 attack strategy, the city will create an informational campaign that will include an online portal showing how to deal with the blood-sucking critters (it will join the city’s existing rat portal) and will hire a dedicated staff to help residents and businesses control infestations.

Not even a centimeter long, bedbugs wait until night to feast on their victims, leaving behind red welts and weeks of itchy paranoia. They can live as long as one year.

“To bedbugs in the city of New York,” Ms. Quinn shouted from the steps of City Hall, “Drop dead. Your days are over, they’re numbered, we’re not going to take it anymore, we’re sick and tired.”

But New Yorkers dreaming of an around-the-clock offensive on the nocturnal crawlers, or for word that the Ghostbusters had been hired once again to carry out exterminations, may be disappointed.

“They are never going to go away in the way we’d like them,” Ms. Brewer said. “We shouldn’t panic.”

To combat the spread of the insects, the city is urging residents to inspect mattresses and pillows if someone in their household has come into contact with bedbugs. The city recommends using professional exterminators to fight infestations, as well as sealing cracks and eliminating clutter.

City officials have no firm benchmarks as they evaluate the success of the effort, saying it will take time to assess the scope of the problem.

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Comments of the Moment

“ If a commenter doesn't have anything to say, then they shouldn't be commenting!”

— Perley J. Thibodeau
[Look Building Is Named a Landmark](#)

“ Governor Paterson dodged a bullet. There was impropriety (i.e., inappropriate conduct”) that could have easily morphed into obstruction of justice. Very stupid conduct, even if not found to be illegal.”

— Eugene Gorin
[Ex-Judge Recommends No Charges Against Paterson](#)

“ When my grandmother was a girl in Iowa, they put each leg of their metal bedstead in a saucer of kerosene. The bedbugs could not get into the bed to bite them. Just don't light a match.”

— mopar
[Bedbugs II: The City Strikes Back!](#)

“ We have lowered our rate of intercourse to four times a week.”

— manrico
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But if all goes as planned, the population of bedbugs across the city stands to fall in the years ahead as communities of insects are drenched in pesticides, yanked from crevices and scorched in dryers.

Ms. Quinn showed no sympathy. When an entomologist at Wednesday's news conference pulled a capsule containing a bedbug from his pocket as a visual aid, she did not flinch.

"The bedbug in a jar," she said, "will not be answering any questions."

[Bedbug Battle Plan](#)

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14 Comments

1. July 28, 2010
6:06 pm

[Link](#)

All I'm reading here is a lot of politicians posturing and talking tough. But I don't see any real plan or program to actually attack the problem.

How can there be? It's not the City government's role to fight an insect infestation. That's the role of people affected by it.

Unless the City is going to pass out free insecticide (unwise) or use taxpayer money to hire exterminators to go into the homes of the affected (heaven forbid!) what exactly do they propose to do — er...except waste a half-million dollars on PR campaigns and websites?

Simply put, it's bad enough the bed bugs are bleeding us — watch out when the politicians start the bloodsucking.

— *George*

2. July 28, 2010
6:13 pm

[Link](#)

The plan is to have politicians coated in insecticides sleep their way through the infected areas.

— *Sleeping tight, and not letting the bedbugs bite.*

3. July 28, 2010

It's a sad day indeed when politicians are reduced to

 Slide Show »

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6:26 pm

[Link](#)

shouting at insects from the steps of City Hall.
Must be the heat.

— *Sal*

4. July 28, 2010
8:09 pm

[Link](#)

Maybe thought must be given to allowing limited use, indoors, of DDT by professionals. It was successfully used to eradicate bedbugs in the past.

— *Dr Bob in the Bronx*

5. July 28, 2010
8:13 pm

[Link](#)

I used to live in the city in the years 97 to 2004. I used to work for a flea market agent and my apartment was crawling with this bug. it is a nightmare and daymare . I used exterminator , some kind of insect bomb , got rid of all my furniture and was put to bare minimum. quit the job ofcourse!!.
so people associating with flea market , be aware of the crawling creatures!!

— *Mary*

6. July 28, 2010
8:19 pm

[Link](#)

You mean a millimeter long, no? A centimeter long bedbug would indeed be a bedbug to fear.

— *Aaron*

7. July 28, 2010
8:23 pm

[Link](#)

Since no articles that I've seen on the bedbug problem seem to explicitly mention laundries, laundromats and building-wide laundry rooms, etc. as problem areas for bedbug infestations, I'm assuming that they aren't any special cause of concern. However, I wish some of the articles would explicitly mentioned this fact, if it is indeed a fact, as this would then show that scientists and government officials have considered the possibility, discounted it for "x" reasons, and that they have no policy recommendations to make in this area.

Although I realize that it's likely that bedbugs (and their eggs?) are washed away in washing machines, or killed in hot water, and that those bedbugs (and eggs?) that might somehow survive a wash in a washing machine are probably killed in dryers, it still seems to me that laundries, laundromats and building-wide laundry rooms might still be problem areas for the following reasons:

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1) I've noticed that a surprising number of people seem to use those wheeled laundry baskets (some of which are made of canvas) to sort UNWASHED laundry.

2) Not every load of laundry is going to be washed in hot water.

3) Some laundromats do not seem to have hot water anyway even when that setting is selected.

4) Not all clothes, e.g., permanent press, are put into dryers, especially hot dryers, after washing.

Again, I realize that the above may not really be factors in the spread of bedbugs but, if this is in fact the case, it would be helpful I think if officials would specifically say so along the following lines (if true): "bedbugs are killed even when clothes are washed in cold water"; "clothes put in laundry baskets are unlikely to be infested, especially if the baskets are wire rather than canvas"; "for whatever reason, no known cases of bed bug infestations have been traced to laundries, laundromats, or building-wide laundry rooms, etc.

Benjamin Hemric
July 28, 2010, 8:24 p.m.

— *Benjamin Hemric*

8. July 28, 2010
8:39 pm

[Link](#)

One of the main reasons for the Bedbug Renaissance is government regulations that tie exterminators' hands by preventing them from using the most effective insecticides until the infestation has already established itself. These vermin were not a problem until exterminators were forced to stop using broad-spectrum insecticide sprays.

The best thing government could do to solve the problem would be to allow experts to do what they know best, with as little interference as possible.

<http://www.scarafaggio.us/bedbugs1.htm>

-LL

— *Liberty Lover*

9. July 28, 2010
8:44 pm

[Link](#)

I dealt with bed bugs last January and spent a fortune getting rid of the critters.

The most common way bed bugs are spread is probably

- Jeremiah's Vanishing New York
- Lost City
- Manhattan User's Guide
- Metroblogging NYC
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through travel. Just last night, NBC News said 25% of hotel rooms are infested.

Here's a game plan for protecting yourself against bed bugs while you're traveling. Louis Sorkin, an entomologist from The American Museum of Natural History provides lots of great tips.

<http://moneywatch.bnet.com/saving-money/blog/family-finance/bed-bug-danger-5-ways-to-stay-safe-when-you-travel/2517/>

— *Stacey Bradford*

10. July 28, 2010
8:47 pm

[Link](#)

The renewed effort to eliminate bedbugs should involve yelling at landlords rather than these other insects. Building owners who refuse to exterminate apartments in an attempt to drive out their tenants (and thus get higher rents) are what's really to blame for this epidemic. The laws need to be enforced – owners, not tenants, must make sure that the epidemic stops. And it's the city's responsibility to make them do it.

— *AT*

11. July 28, 2010
9:07 pm

[Link](#)

Yes, it's always the landlord. Tenants never bring bedbugs into the apartment or let an infestation grow so that it infects others.

— *Always*

12. July 28, 2010
9:17 pm

[Link](#)

I think you mean not even a millimeter long. It's like saying of rats, Not Even a Yard Long... (as opposed to a foot). Study, reporter.

— *rb*

13. July 28, 2010
9:17 pm

[Link](#)

One apartment in my building had bedbugs. The co-op board then hired an exterminator to come in and inspect all apartments. He found that 30% of the apartments had bedbugs. After a rancorous meeting, the board agreed to hire an inspector who did not do extermination and had no financial interest in finding bedbugs. This inspector found no infestations. The moral – if you haven't seen a bedbug and no one has been bitten, be skeptical of findings. There might be an epidemic, but there are also

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- The Clever Commute Blog
- The Launch Box

scam artists taking advantage of it.

— *Marian*

14. July 28, 2010
9:26 pm

[Link](#)

From my collection of very old stories, here is one particularly morbid. During the war (for me it's WWII, my age 5 – 12 in Prague, Czech Republic, then Grossdeutsches Reich, Protektorat Bohmen und Mahren) bedbugs apparetnly appeared in our apartment, a middle class dwelling if there was one. My mother had her ophthalmologist's office in the apartment and we assumed (being just bit 'upper class' or 'better' people) that some patients brought them to us.

So, my parents took drastic measures. Germans, always the chemical geniuses, developed Cyclone B (kind of crystals soaked in hydrocyanic acid) that could be spread in dwellings to kill the bugs dead. We have to move out for some 3 – 4 days to stay with my grandmother and/or aunts and I never will never forget the bitter almond smell remaining in the apartment after the treatment was completed and the bedbugs preasumably esterminated. Later on it was helpful in my career as a chemist – the smell is rather unforgettable and quite specific.

The most terrible part of this story is that Cyclone B was the product of choice in the Auschwitz gas chambers – I put these facts toghether only some 30 years ago in this country.

The bottom line: Cyclone B or stuffr that superseded it (some kind of substrate providing lethal concentration of hydrogen cyanide) by evaporatio) is probably not used any longer. One wonders why...

More horror stories to follow.

— *Ladislav Nemeč, Big Bear, CA*

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