

Asia's Poultry Industry:

Are We Ready for Bird Flu?

Not yet, if all indications regarding preparedness activities by national governments and international organizations are concerned. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that only 40 countries so far have come up with preparedness plans in the event an avian influenza pandemic happens.

But aside from the scare of a pandemic, a crucial issue at hand is disease control and prevention of spread at the poultry or bird



level. What is being done to contain the disease? How can the jump from poultry to humans

be prevented and/or contained? What are the economic implications to the countries now affected by avian influenza?

As early as 1997, 18 cases of avian influenza, particularly the H5N1 strain, were reported in Hong Kong. Six people died. Today, eight years of incubation later, avian influenza or bird flu has caused the death of 150 million birds (including those intentionally killed to prevent the spread of the disease) and more than 60 people, with four

countries - Vietnam, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Thailand - being the hardest hit.

What is special about the current outbreak in poultry, which started in 2003, is that it is the largest and most severe in record, according to WHO. More countries have been hit, bird loss is high, and the disease is tenacious, with the virus becoming endemic in parts of Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, China, and Thailand. Lately, Turkey, Japan, and Romania confirmed bird flu outbreaks in poultry.

What Needs to Be Done at the Poultry Level?

- **Set up/Improve Surveillance System**

Surveillance includes the ability to detect an outbreak at the source. The World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) emphasizes that early detection and rapid response mechanisms are crucial to successful control of the disease and to minimizing the number of animals to be killed to stop the spread of the virus. Early recognition and reporting mechanisms have, therefore, to be put in place and operational as soon as possible, especially

in neighboring countries that are still free of the disease like the Philippines.

Spotting an outbreak is, however, just half the issue. The other is the need to be open and transparent in reporting bird flu cases in order to contain the virus. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), as part of its immediate response effort, provided US\$5.5 million to support emergency efforts including establishing regional networks on surveillance, diagnostic and disease information in Asia. A task force was also created to consolidate available data and communication, and undertake disease intelligence, among others.

- **Prevent the spread of the virus**

At this point where H5N1 has jumped from bird to man, there are two ways by which virus may spread: transfer from bird to bird and from bird to human. Both ways have to be controlled.

1. Bird to bird

Mass culling of infected birds and birds that may become infected or become potential hosts of the virus is still the most acceptable control method. Once a case is confirmed, the farm is quarantined and all the birds are killed. The economic impact of this, however, needs also to be considered. How will poultry



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raisers be compensated? As one bird flu expert in Indonesia said, "The (Indonesian) government does not have enough money to compensate farmers if mass culling were used as part of efforts to combat the bird flu outbreak."

Vietnam has seen three surges of bird flu outbreaks. In 2003, the first wave, some 43 million birds died or were culled. On the second wave, the outbreak took another couple of million birds. Now on its third wave, the government is trying *vaccination* of its entire poultry population.

However, this effort is proving to be difficult. A newspaper reports that the most common obstacles are: the low wages paid to the people doing the vaccination; difficulties in identifying which chicken have already been vaccinated; and the late delivery of vaccines. A Vietnamese official revealed that in some Mekong Delta provinces, poultry raisers hide their birds to avoid vaccination. The lack of information to create awareness of preventive measures also proves to be a hindrance to the government's efforts.

Quarantine of infected areas is another measure. Restricting human movement in and out of the quarantined area and mass culling of the entire poultry population would require concerted efforts by health and agricultural

workers, as well as local law enforcement bodies. Likewise, a quarantine zone of 3 to 5-kilometer radius from the source of contamination would be quite reasonable.

Setting up shallow pools with disinfectant for travelers and vehicles to pass through could help restrict the spread of the virus.

2. Bird to human

Scientists have identified the main route of transmission from birds to human to be direct contact with the infected poultry or objects contaminated with the birds' feces. Generally, most of the victims of the H5N1 virus were people who handled the infected birds.

The fact that in many rural or periurban areas of Asia chickens and ducks are allowed to roam freely, or cultural practices like cock fighting increase direct contact with poultry, contributes highly to the incidence of people contacting the disease.

Persons handling infected and suspect birds are urged to *use protective gear* like gloves and masks. Periodic washing of the hands and regular cleaning and inspection of poultry cages and their surroundings are likewise recommended.

- **Prevent the entry of the virus**

In countries like the Philippines that are still bird flu-free, governments are more concerned with preventing the entry of infested birds or contaminated products. The Philippines' Department of Agriculture has set a ban on the importation of poultry and poultry products from countries with avian influenza cases, for instance.

- **Provide up-to-date, reliable, and responsible information**

FAO has developed an avian flu bulletin and a web page to provide information on the situation in Asia and affected countries, as well as resource information to fight the virus. Documents on diagnostic guiding principles, recommendations



for prevention, control, and eradication, as well as the FAO/OIE global strategy for the control of avian influenza were also written, disseminated, and posted on the Web.

Providing up-to-date and reliable information is a way of "managing public anxiety" over what some fear could become a pandemic, if the virus mutates into a variant that would imitate the 1918 Spanish Influenza in its lethality and kill thousands of people in a short time.

Funding Assistance

As further proof of the lack of readiness, Vietnam and Cambodia have appealed for international help in terms of funds and technical assistance to fight the disease outbreak. Vietnam needs about US\$50 million and help in stockpiling anti-bird flu drugs. The Philippines' Bureau of Animal Industry is requesting from government about PhP250 million to fund its preparedness and response plans. Of this amount, PhP100 million would be allotted for indemnifying farmers whose poultry might be infected.

To help needy countries, the Asian Development Bank announced it would allocate US\$58 million for grant projects against the bird flu threat in Asia and the Pacific. Some of these grants will be in cooperation with other international agencies like WHO, FAO and OIE. The World Bank, in turn, is finalizing plans to provide up to \$500 million to countries to "supplement government resources, strengthen veterinary systems, and put in place culling and vaccine programs for animals." The World Bank is particularly targeting low-income countries like Vietnam and Indonesia. (Vivian T.M. Ledesma)

