

Bird flu fears take wing: Southeast Asia braces for the worst as health authorities gather to formulate a defense against feared epidemic

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Bangkok, Thailand --- In a narrow street that locals call "Chicken Alley," under brilliant red banners heralding the Lunar New Year, a man hauled a basket of squawking poultry past the Pae Sue Chicken Shop and heaved it into the back of a truck.

In front of the shop, where the basket and 16 like it had been standing, another Pae Sue worker washed heaps of droppings into the street. The high-pressure hose sprinkled shoppers squeezing through the market stalls and sent a fine spray over a display of peeled fruit.

It was an everyday afternoon in Bangkok's Chinatown and a scene to chill a virologist's heart: a perfect setting for the possible transmission of avian influenza, a lethal poultry disease that has killed three of every four people it has made ill.

Health authorities fear avian influenza because they believe it has the potential to cause a worldwide pandemic with millions of human deaths. And they are frustrated because intensive efforts for more than a year to curb its spread through birds --- the main source of humans' exposure --- have not succeeded.

Scientists and health authorities from more than 20 countries meet Wednesday in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, to examine emergency measures to control the virus in Asian poultry and waterfowl.

"It is quite clear that we cannot continue doing business as usual," said Dr. Klaus Stohr of the World Health Organization. "There is no sign that this disease can be eliminated in the foreseeable future."

Avian flu H5N1 has sickened 55 people, killing 42 of them, since January 2004. Since Dec. 30, 13 people in Vietnam and one in Cambodia have become sick; all but one died, according to the World Health Organization.

"We are expecting more human cases over the next few weeks because this is high season for avian influenza in that part of the world," Dr. Julie Gerberding, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said Monday. "Our assessment is that this is a very high threat." She made the comments to the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington.

Dr. Joseph Domenech of the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization on Sunday called avian influenza "an enormous sword of Damocles" hanging over the world.

Fear of mutation

The U.N. agency has warned that aid shipments following Asia's devastating tsunamis could help spread avian flu. And late last month, researchers from the Thai Ministry of Public Health and the CDC concluded that an 11-year-old girl infected her mother and aunt with the flu. The girl and her mother died.

Almost all known cases of avian flu have come from human exposure to poultry. The family cluster fueled fears the virus will mutate into a form capable of person-to-person transmission, a precondition for an epidemic.

A second team from the Thai Ministry of Public Health reported that Thailand has probably had more cases of avian flu than the ministry announced earlier. The new tally listed 21 probable but unconfirmed cases over the past year in addition to the 12 known cases.

And in last week's New England Journal of Medicine, Oxford University researchers in Ho Chi Minh City described two children who died in February 2004 of acute encephalitis that turned out to be caused by avian flu. They became the first patients known to die of bird flu without developing pneumonia, the disease's hallmark.

Flu experts find the Oxford paper particularly disturbing. Both children had diarrhea, and lab tests found the H5N1 virus in their feces, spurring fears that the virus could be passed easily from person to person in crowded or unsanitary conditions.

"It is clear the spectrum of disease is much wider than we thought, and the death toll must be higher than we think, considering it was only by chance that these cases were detected," said Stohr, who is chief of the World Health Organization's global influenza program.

The meeting in Ho Chi Minh City comes one year after an emergency summit called by U.N. officials in response to the first wave of avian influenza H5N1, which struck eight southeast Asian countries, killed or prompted the preventive slaughter of more than 100 million birds, and caused profound economic harm to some of the affected nations.

Since that meeting --- which focused on possible ways to control the virus in poultry in Asia --- researchers have found the virus affects a wide range of species, from domestic ducks and wild waterfowl to mice, ferrets and big cats in the wild. They also have gradually faced the probability that the virus is so entrenched that it no longer can be eradicated by mass killing of birds.

The implications of that realization are visible throughout southeast Asia, where people, poultry and waterfowl live intertwined lives.

In Thailand, almost all rural households and many urban ones keep chickens that roam through neighborhoods. The crow of roosters is as common a sound in traffic-choked Bangkok as the blare of a taxi's horn. In the country's center, ducks are used to clean rice fields of dropped grain after the harvest is over. Large flocks are herded on foot or trucked from farm to farm.

North of Bangkok, the road that leads from the highway to the offices of the CDC's International Emerging Infections Program is lined with cages holding fierce, glossy fighting cocks for sale.

Thailand as model

Cocks are often associated with avian flu: An 18-year-old man who raised fighting cocks in eastern Thailand died of the disease last September after sucking blood from the beak of one of his birds during a fight, and 78 cocks that died last month in north Thailand were all found to be infected with H5N1.

Thailand is the world's fourth-largest exporter of chicken, but its massive poultry operations are capitalized well enough to afford Western biosecurity measures to keep out disease, said Dr. Scott Dowell, the chief of the emerging infections program.

"None of the cases here have been associated with the big poultry farms," he said. "They are huge, but they are dwarfed by the vast numbers of people who have poultry in their back yards."

Thailand's effort to combat bird flu is considered a model by world health agencies. When the disease flared in birds last fall, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra made identifying cases the responsibility of the Ministry of Public Health's "village volunteers," a corps of more than 900,000 people who keep track of 10 to 15 households each.

The kingdom has since created a national bird flu task force and equipped labs throughout the country with the genetic fingerprinting necessary for identifying the disease.

Yet the virus persists. On Monday, the Thai government agreed to a controversial step: It plans to vaccinate its chickens against avian flu despite fears that the action would hurt exports. The European Union and Japan have signaled that they find vaccinated poultry unacceptable, while other nations, including some in Asia, have periodically blocked imports of unvaccinated chicken from countries harboring the avian flu virus.

Vaccination will be discussed at the Vietnam conference. Virologists are reluctant to endorse it because it prevents sickness but does not block infection. They fear it could allow the virus to spread broadly without being detected.

"It would be good for the developed countries to consider supporting disease control in Asia," Stohr said. "Whatever is done to control disease in animals will help to avert an influenza pandemic."