Asia Struggles to Keep Humans and Chickens Apart

SONG PHINONG, SUPHANBURI PROVINCE, THAILAND—After having 30,000 chickens culled when H5N1 turned up on a farm 2 kilometers away, Boonchu Taeng-orn got serious about biosecurity. When permitted to restock his farm here in the central lowlands 2 hours north of Bangkok, he followed recommendations of Thailand’s Department of Livestock Development to the letter. He strung netting from the shed roofs to the tilapia ponds beneath to keep wild birds out. (Biosecurity experts discourage locating chicken coops near open water, but raising tilapia on bird droppings is key to the economics of chicken farming here.) As few workers as necessary go into the sheds, changing first into work clothes kept at the site, walking through a disinfecting mist, and stepping in pails of disinfectant on the way in. The egg crates are disinfected before use, as are vehicles at the gates to each compound. And Taeng-orn follows the all-in, all-out practice: When he fills a shed with new chicks, he keeps them until egg production drops and then sells the entire batch. Sheds and cages are washed and repaired before the next batch arrives. “The emphasis on cleanliness is definitely good. It is more humane for the animals and safer for the workers,” Taeng-orn says.

It is also safer for the world. Infectious disease experts agree that keeping zoonotic diseases like H5N1 and severe acute respiratory syndrome from crossing the species barrier into humans will partly depend on the efforts of millions of farmers like Taeng-orn. A greater challenge is to extend such practices to the numerous households that keep backyard chickens. Alex Thiermann, an official with the World Organization for Animal Health, says that large poultry operations in Asia have biosecurity practices on par with farms in the United States or Europe. But in the backyards, there is “no biosecurity at all.”

A key element of Thailand’s push to stamp out H5N1 is to educate small holders and require that even backyard chickens be kept in coops to minimize contact with wild birds and family members. Vietnam, too, has launched an education campaign targeting small chicken operations. But no one expects sudden changes in such an age-old practice.

Hong Kong is taking aim at another entrenched custom: It is considering closing its live animal markets. Currently, buyers pick a live chicken at one of more than 800 live animal shops and have it slaughtered on the spot. K. Y. Yuen, a microbiologist at the University of Hong Kong, favors a central slaughtering facility, both to reduce the chances of exposing the general public to avian influenza and to cut the incidence of other infections. “Other advanced countries adopted central slaughter long ago,” he says. The government asked for public comment this summer and is now deciding how to proceed.

—D.N.