Asian nations step up action to curb spread of avian influenza

Outbreak is spreading at an unprecedented speed, WHO says, and nowhere can be considered safe

Thailand confirmed its first two human victims of avian influenza this week (Jan 26 and 27), as nations throughout Asia tightened import bans and stepped up the slaughter of millions of chickens to halt the spread of the disease, which has claimed eight lives so far.

Captain Boonmanut, a 6-year-old boy, was the first victim of the H5N1 strain of avian influenza in Thailand. Like the six fatal Vietnamese cases—all but one of whom were children—he lived in close proximity to chickens, which are the only known source of infection so far for human beings. The second Thai fatality was also a young boy.

New cases of the disease have been reported among the bird populations of Indonesia, Pakistan, Cambodia, and Laos; and on Jan 27, the Chinese government confirmed that the disease had surfaced in a duck farm in Guangxi province. The farm is close to the border with Vietnam, where the first human casualties were reported.

Two other suspected outbreaks of the virus have been reported hundreds of miles away in the central Chinese provinces of Hubei and Hunan. No human cases have been found in the world’s most populous nation, the government stressed.

WHO officials warned that the disease was spreading at an unprecedented speed. “We don’t know how this virus is spreading, and so it’s safe to presume that nowhere can consider itself safe”, WHO spokesman Peter Cordingly told Reuters news agency.

Already more deadly than the outbreak in 1997 that claimed six lives in Hong Kong, the virus could become far more dangerous if it mutates to allow transmission between human beings. In a sign of the increasing concern, WHO dispatched Theresa Tam, a Canadian paediatrician specialising in influenza, to Bangkok on Monday and began lobbying pharmaceutical companies to start research into a new vaccine.

At WHO’s headquarters in Geneva, officials acknowledged that the standard influenza vaccine used by millions of people each year is ineffective against H5N1. Genetic tests indicate the H5N1 virus is resistant to less expensive anti-influenza drugs, such as amantadine and rimantadine. However, three other more expensive antivirals seem to be effective—and the health agency urged preparations to mass produce the drugs in case the outbreak reaches pandemic proportions.

Klaus Stohr, head of WHO’s Global Influenza Programme, stressed the importance of acting quickly to ensure there is no repeat of the worst recorded influenza pandemic—that of 1918 when more than 40 million people died worldwide.

“There is a chance that something can go wrong”, WHO but it looks as if, if we act decisively now, then there is a window of opportunity to control the disease before it takes global proportions”, he said.

Migratory birds and the trade in live poultry are believed to be the two most likely ways in which the disease is being spread. Attempted cover-ups appear to be hampering efforts to control the disease. Thailand did not confirm its first case—in a flock in Suphanburi province—until a week ago, but the government acknowledged that it has been slaughtering chickens for months. Since November last year, about 9.1 million birds have been culled, usually by soldiers and prisoners in protective gear who bury the chickens alive in huge pits.

“The government knew, so why didn’t they tell the public so that we could protect ourselves?” said Chaman Boonmanut, the father of one of the Thai victims.

With government compensation of only 10% of market rates, farmers are reportedly rushing to sell their birds on the market before the slaughter is widened. This has raised fears that the disease will be difficult to contain. Within a day of its first fatality, Thailand announced that at least two other cases were suspected among its human population.

Indonesia also acknowledged last weekend (Jan 25) that 4.7 million birds in 51 of its districts had died since August. Reversing previous denials, it said that 60% were victims of avian influenza or efforts to contain it.

Avian influenza has also been found in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. South Korea has killed 24 million chickens and ducks in recent months, though—like Taiwan—it claims that the strain of the disease is less dangerous to human beings than that found in southeast Asia.