

Bangladesh must prevent a bird flu disaster

ZEESHAN HASAN

INDIA finally confirmed last week that it has bird flu. Thousands of birds have already died there, and a number of poultry workers may have been infected. Fortunately, the low number of human infections means that the virus has still not mutated to a form which can easily infect humans. Since cooking destroys the virus, consumers are far safer than poultry workers, who are in continuous contact with birds.

For safety's sake, since live birds can transmit the virus in their droppings, consumers are better off buying dressed chickens. If buying chicken from a live market, buy from a clean-looking store (as soap has disinfectant properties), and ask the storekeeper to dress it for you. Of course, everyone should wash their hands with soap after returning from a live market. Luckily, Bangladesh banned the import of all Indian poultry products last year, which may have saved us for now. We now have at least a chance to prevent the infection from crossing the border, since the biggest risk of spreading the infection is through transport of live poultry.

But it is no longer enough for the government to continue banning imports country by country as bird flu infections surface. Regardless of the origin country, each import of chicks represents a possible threat of infection. This is because even if the chicks were free from bird flu at the source, it is possible for them to become infected in transit, especially if airlines are using the same planes for domestic and international flights. For example, an Indian aircraft could be carrying chicks from London to Dhaka via Delhi which were originally uninfected, as the UK is free of bird flu.

However, the same aircraft may have earlier carried infected Indian chicks from Bombay to Delhi, which could have contaminated the cargo hold.

So the prudent course of action now is to reduce the total volume of chicks imported. This will decrease the total risk of importing infected chicks. Since our entire industry is dependent on the import of foreign high-yield varieties, the only way to reduce the total import is to focus on the smaller volumes of earlier generations. Currently, the total Bangladesh poultry market is something like 200 million broiler chicks (or chicks raised for meat) per year. This can be supplied by importing about 1.6 million broiler parent chicks (or chicks raised by hatcheries to produce broiler chicks) per year, assuming that each broiler parent produces approximately 120 broiler chicks. This is far too large a number to test for bird flu upon arrival. However, if we move one step up the breeding chain, the entire Bangladesh market can be supplied by importing only about 40,000 grandparent chicks (again assuming each broiler grandparent produces approximately 40 broiler parents). So all poultry imports other than grandparent chicks should immediately be banned. This will result in imports shrinking to a number which can be effectively tested 100 percent for bird flu on arrival.

However, we have to accept that whatever measures we undertake may fail, and that we could face a bird flu outbreak in Bangladesh. The first thing that the government needs to do is to inspect poultry farms regularly and test for infections. If any cases are found, all poultry within a 3 km radius must be destroyed. The lesson from India is that farmers must be compensated quickly for their infected flocks, or they will conceal and sell



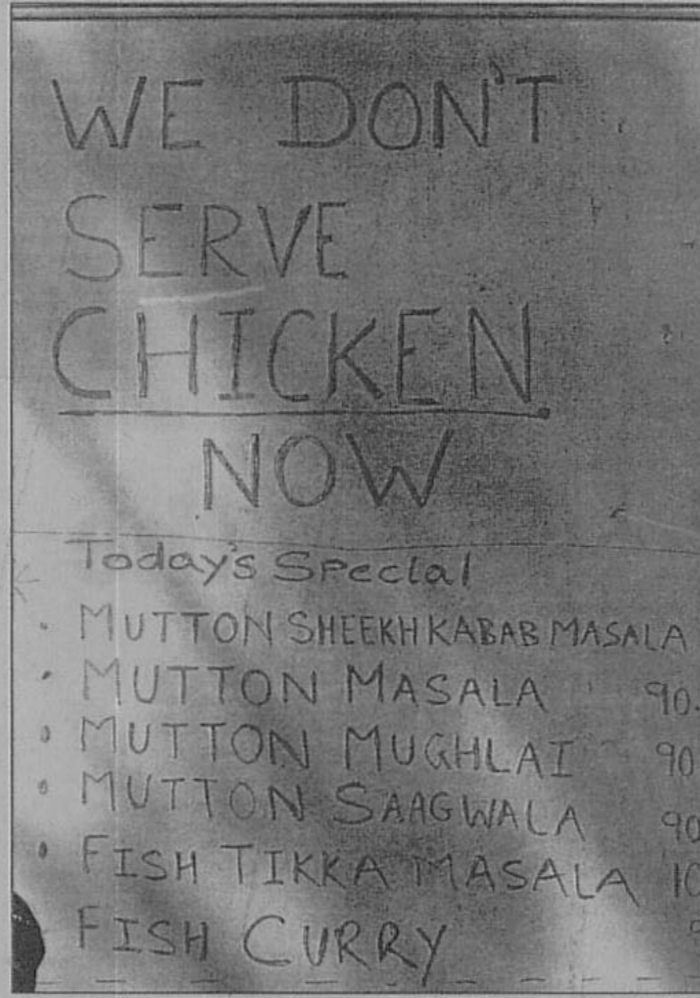
PHOTO: AFP

them, spreading infection further. Any attempt by farmers to cover up outbreaks for fear of financial loss, or any lack of sincerity on the part of livestock officials in their monitoring activities, will certainly bring about a disaster. Infections can only be contained if they are detected and eradicated early. Otherwise they quickly spread out of control.

Unfortunately, we cannot be sure that any of the above precautions will work. Wealthier nations such as Thailand, Indonesia, and

now the EU have been completely unable to control the bird flu situation. The reality is that our own monitoring and destruction program may fail as well. Given that, the only real alternative we may be left with is to vaccinate all of our poultry against bird flu.

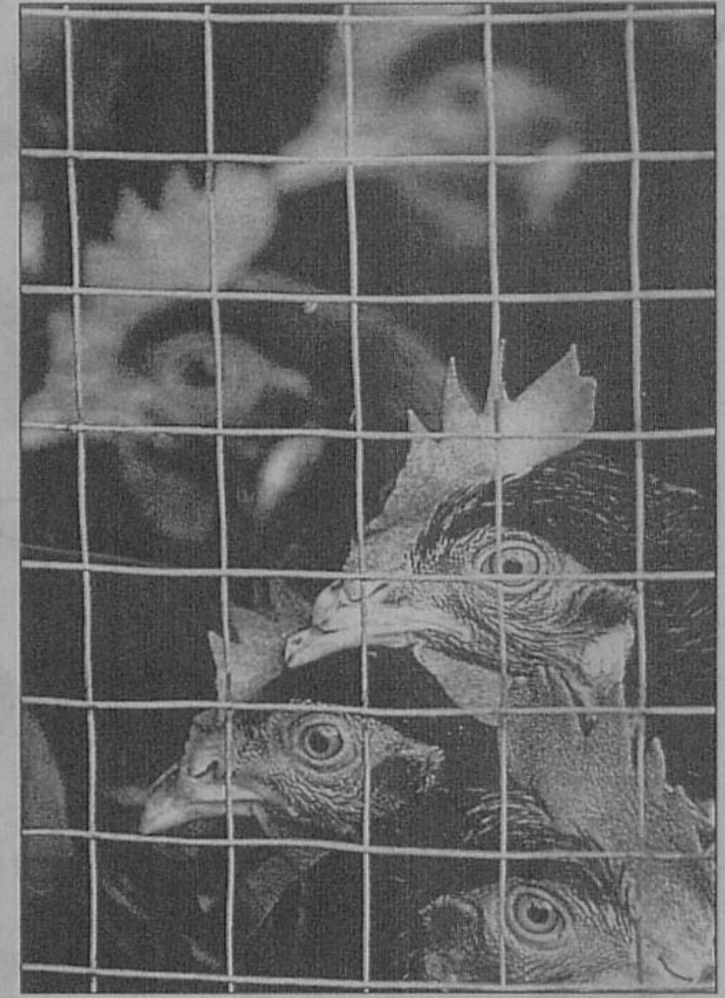
Vaccination is a strategy that most Western countries have resisted so far, as it allows infected birds to survive the disease but still carry the virus; thus they can transmit the virus further. Vaccinated birds can also be confused with



infected birds in simple antigen tests; so vaccinations are only feasible if there are appropriate testing facilities available. Otherwise vaccination makes the virus impossible to detect and wipe out; this increases the long-term risk of human infections.

But with the spread of bird flu in the migratory bird population, there may be no real alternative to vaccination. If the virus becomes endemic to wild birds, it can never be eradicated as there is no means of monitoring them. Thus the

WHO, which previously opposed vaccination, has just recommended that Nigeria vaccinates its poultry in order to prevent the disease spreading. China is also planning to vaccinate all of its billions of chickens. The EU, which has also previously opposed vaccination, is now allowing both France and Holland to vaccinate all their poultry which is housed in open sheds (since these are at more exposed to migratory birds and at higher risk of infection). Almost all commercial poultry in Bangladesh



is in open sheds; by this logic we should vaccinate all our chickens as well.

So far Bangladesh has also resisted vaccination, and the government has not allowed any imports of bird flu vaccines. This is reasonable at the moment; since we don't yet have an outbreak, we shouldn't vaccinate in advance, as it will undermine attempts to monitor and eradicate. However, if we have an outbreak and eradication fails, we need to be able to vaccinate immediately. Vaccine

will probably not be available in sufficient quantity for weeks or months, as current worldwide demand for it is rising so fast. So the government should immediately make arrangements to stock vaccines in the country. They can either import it themselves, or require hatcheries to do it. This will enable the industry to vaccinate if and when the need arises, which is an option that needs to be available to us.

Zeeshan Hasan is director of one of the largest poultry hatcheries in Bangladesh.

Past as prologue

A newly confident Russia has stepped into Europe's shoes as middleman between East and West, reaching out to the region's untouchables -- and making it clear that Moscow won't be taking orders from anyone. The new assertiveness, analysts say, is part and parcel of Russia's recent muscle-flexing in Eastern Europe. After a winter spent wielding energy as a political weapon against wayward former Soviet states such as Ukraine and Georgia, the Kremlin has now turned its sights to a broader forum.

OWEN MATTHEWS

ONCE, not so long ago, Europe saw itself as the Middle East's honest broker, poised between a hard-line United States and an equally intransigent Muslim world. At the same time Russia, once a regional superpower, was... nowhere. While the European Union played mediator in conflicts from Palestine to Iran, Russia contented itself with hawking a few weapons systems and tending its own post-Soviet backyard.

What a difference a couple of years can make. In the wake of Hamas' Palestinian election win and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's defiance over his

country's uranium-enrichment program, Europe is edging ever closer to the tougher stance taken by the United States. Meanwhile, a newly confident Russia has stepped into Europe's shoes as middleman between East and West, reaching out to the region's untouchables -- and making it clear that Moscow won't be taking orders from anyone.

Earlier this month, President Vladimir Putin outraged the United States and Israel by inviting the leaders of Hamas to Moscow for talks. "Hamas is in power -- this is a fact" was Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov's blunt message. "It came to power as a result of free democratic elections." Moscow has broken

ranks with the West in Iran, too. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that Russia won't -- for the time being, at least -- back UN sanctions against Tehran, even as US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice complained that Iran is now "in open defiance of the international community." Russia insists instead that the way forward is to persuade Tehran to accept a scheme to enrich its uranium on Russian territory. "No one has the right to deny another country the right to safe atomic power," Russia's atomic-energy chief, Sergei Kiriyenko, recently told Newsweek.

The new assertiveness, analysts say, is part and parcel of Russia's recent muscle-flexing in Eastern

Europe. After a winter spent wielding energy as a political weapon against wayward former Soviet states such as Ukraine and Georgia, the Kremlin has now turned its sights to a broader forum. "First Russia went on a counterattack in the former Soviet Union," says analyst Dmitri Trenin of the Carnegie Moscow Center. "Now it is doing the same in the Middle East." Putin gave an important clue to Russia's thinking earlier this month when he described the Hamas victory as "an important setback for American efforts in the Middle East." The implication: America has no infallible monopoly on power and influence, and certainly not at Russia's expense.

For all the United States' and Israel's indignation at Russia's meddling, there's actually a chance that Moscow may succeed where the others have failed. "Unlike America, Russia is not bound up by legal objections to talking (with Hamas)," says Alexander Kalugin, Russia's special envoy to the Middle East, who met with senior Hamas representatives last week in Ramallah. And what Russia has to say to Hamas doesn't differ much in substance from the message propounded by the other members of the "quartet" of interested parties -- the United States, the EU and the United Nations. "Their message will be consistent: that Israel has a right to exist, that previous Palestinian Authority agreements should be honored and that they should renounce violence," says one Western diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The main problem is that Russia didn't see fit to discuss its initiative with the others. "There was not a lot of advance consulta-

tion about the talks," admits the diplomat. For the Kremlin, it seems, the important point is to distance itself from the United States -- and to emphasize that Russia is no longer a junior partner in Washington's foreign policy.

The risk is, of course, that Russia's strategy of talking to Hamas could backfire. After all, Russia dubs its own Chechen separatists "terrorists" and complains vociferously when the U.K. and United States offer political asylum to rebel leaders such as Ilyas Akhmadov, a self-styled "ambassador" of independent Chechnya. "If today Moscow talks to Hamas," warns Russia's Chief Rabbi Beryl Lazar, "tomorrow we'll hear demands for talks with (Chechen rebel Shamil) Basayev, the day after tomorrow for talks with al-Qaeda."

And Russia's self-appointed role as honest broker doesn't sit terribly well with its place as a major arms supplier, especially to Iran. Last month Rosvooruzheniye, Russia's giant



PHOTO: AFP

state-owned arms-export company, announced that Tehran had agreed to spend \$1 billion on 30 Tor-M1 air-defense missile systems, capable of protecting a target from up to 48 incoming planes or projectiles to a range of six kilometers. Iran also has a long-standing accord with Moscow for up to \$7 billion in conventional arms, including MiG-29 fighters, assistance with Iran's small submarine fleet, BMP-3 armored personnel carriers and landing craft.

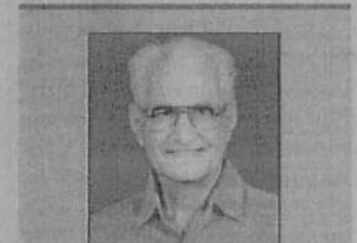
The bottom line? Moscow may be broadly cooperative in interna-

tional efforts to get Iran to cease its uranium-enrichment program -- but at the same time, it's providing Iran with the means to defend itself against a possible air raid like the Israeli strike that destroyed Saddam Hussein's French-built Osirak reactor in 1981. In that, Russia's "new" role looks more like that played in the past -- less middleman than a check on Washington and the West.

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With Anna Nemtsova in Moscow.

Any lesson from Nepal?



M.B. NAQVI writes from Karachi

KING Gyanendra of Nepal held local bodies polls recently. Opposition had ensured through their four day strike then that popular participation in the polls would be minimal. Nepalese authorities claim that 10 per cent of voters came. Others say the exercise was a fiasco. The King now wants to form a national government. While the tough year-long political standoff in the country continues, chances of opposition parties choosing to serve under him, without major reforms, are slim. He had dismissed the Parliament, government and assumed all powers himself last February; what followed was a kind of royal Martial Law. Although Maoists' now the main opposition, unilateral ceasefire has ended, the rioting has ensued. The King does not seem desirous of a compromise. A Maoist leader has observed that the only future of the King is

PLAIN WORDS

While caste is not a factor here of the same genre as in Nepal and India, Pakistanis too have their tribalism and biradari systems. They have social problems and economic inequalities are growing rapidly. If the economic development continues not to deliver jobs and equal human rights for all, Pakistanis will face other Islamic-looking troubles.

either execution or exile.

That is the background. Political reality in Nepal comprises the ruthless dictatorship of one man: King Gyanendra. Needless to say, he is heavy handed. Why he sacked the constitutional system was because, he claims, the politicians, and the parties were corrupt and perhaps inefficient. Another equally congenial reality is the Maoist revolutionary struggle that has been going from strength to strength; indeed most of the countryside is controlled by Maoists. Not that cities are totally outside their sway. However, the King's desire to prosecute a relentless anti-Maoist campaign is the consequent reality.

The King's achievements during the year are few. The Maoist revolt has only received an impetus by his actions. The mainstream parties that did not have any contact with the Maoists earlier are today in a formal alliance with Maoist groups. This alliance wants a return to parliamentary system. As for the King's own future, there may still be some ambiguity. While anti-

Monarchy sentiment is widespread and is clearly articulated, there is some uncertainty regarding what the united front of Maoists and other political parties will precisely do the moment it becomes clear that Gyanendra can govern no longer.

Meantime, what was unthinkable has happened. The campaign in the streets of Kathmandu and other cities has become fiercely anti-Monarchy and many now demand a republic. True, there may still be some royalists. But the weight of those who do not wish the Monarchy to survive is much more noticeable than of royalists. What the next move of the King and the political parties would be would depend largely on the King himself, as noted. Doubtless, major powers' preferences will matter, especially what India and the US want. The rest of the world can only wait.

As it happens, many in the west are greatly alarmed. The Indian government, to its credit, reacted sharply against the King's action last year. It still wants the King to restore the parliamentary system.

India has of course many other reasons to wish an early return of normalcy in the country. But what normalcy in Nepal would now mean is not easy to foresee. In the post-Gyanendra period, Maoists may become a more or less dominant influence. How would New Delhi react to that is not at all clear.

Main Indian concern today is that the current autocracy in Nepal is giving a fillip to Maoist revolts inside India. Not that the Indian Maoists needed much help or instruction from their Nepalese counterparts. The Maoist tradition and parties in India are fairly strong and older than in Nepal. What New Delhi perceives is a clear linkage between Indian and Nepalese Maoists through the porous border between north Bihar and Nepal. In many ways, it is easy for the two sets of Maoists to help each other in an emergency. Indian Maoists or Naxalites are active in Bihar, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Andhra Pradesh. Although the extent of cooperation is not known, Nepalese Maoists have obviously been in fairly close

contact with Naxalites. Inside India a virtual corridor running from north to south through Bihar, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, parts of Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh has notionally emerged; they have now registered their presence even in Karnataka. The Naxalite movement in India is a fact of life, not to be ignored.

True, India has excellent defences against political extremism. Indian democracy is alive and well enough. It is a great stabilizing factor. It lays the groundwork for economic development. India's growth is fairly fast. Thanks to the kind of development that is taking place, it leaves many commonalities between the countryside of India and Nepal. There is massive underemployment, poverty and rural masses' loss of hope. Both countries have the caste problem. The lower castes correspond to the poorest of the poor in both countries. Which is where a class warfare morphs into a caste warfare in both India and Nepal. Nepalese economy, for all the claims of development, remains backward and largely stagnant.

Much of the prosperity in Nepalese cities used to come from tourism. Tourist income has been affected by the Maoist revolt. One does not worry about what happens in India because the Indian political system is strong, stable and capable of adapting itself. It is Nepal that causes worries to many

outside powers: US, India, China, and probably tangentially Pakistan. What they all want is stability no matter if Nepalese government is democratic -- or autocratic.

All that an outside commentator can add is that stability per se is an illusive and not necessarily noble objective. There can be stability under a ruthless dictatorship. There is a productive stability under a stable democratic system, as is possible in India -- in sharp contrast to indefinite stagnation under autocracy. Foreign powers are not interested in caste question or economic inequalities or even grinding poverty of the masses. But the Nepalese are vitally interested in these things. They want all the human rights that ideas of human equality generate and which in turn yield political advance and economic development results. But this development should deliver jobs for the perennially underemployed poor. The ideal is jobs with human rights. Nepalese want that. It must be added so do the Indian poor in the vastnesses of India.

So long as economic development does not produce plenty of jobs and does not sustain an egalitarian distribution of new wealth, an explosive situation is sure to arise in time. Rapid statistical advance is possible while job creation remains quite inadequate. Much of that is happening in India

and Pakistan. India remains blessed with a political system that continues to absorb the shock of a well developed Naxalism. True many doubt this, absorbing ability will last forever in the context of such superficial but rapid growth. However, democracy's conserving magic has hitherto worked. Many Indians think that since India has passed an employment guarantee scheme, all will be well. But this is both partial and too meager. It is sure to grow in extent as well as perhaps benefits. Whether that would be the Nirvana remains to be seen.

Pakistanis need to study the Nepalese situation carefully. They have to see if any lessons can be drawn for this country. The government claims the economy to be in the pink of health. It is so for only elite social groups; but not so for non-elite groups. And there are far too many of the latter. They are the vast majority of Pakistanis. While caste is not a factor here of the same genre as in Nepal and India, Pakistanis too have their tribalism and biradari systems. They have social problems and economic inequalities are growing rapidly. If the economic development continues not to deliver jobs and equal human rights for all, Pakistanis will face other Islamic-looking troubles.



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