

China's bird flu outbreak feared under-reported, Asian cull questioned

AFP, Beijing

China's bird flu outbreak could be far larger than reported, the World Health Organisation said yesterday as questions were raised over the safety of a regional cull of more than 25 million chickens.

The UN agency said that given China's size and its vast poultry industry, there was only a "small window of opportunity" to prevent a major outbreak of the disease that has killed 10 people and spread to 10 Asian nations.

"It's entirely possible that there are outbreaks elsewhere (in China) that have not been reported," said Beijing-based WHO spokesman Roy Wadia.

"If there are small, isolated outbreaks, it could be entirely possible it could be unnoticed. This could cause the virus to spread faster," he said, urging Beijing to swiftly improve cooperation and prevention measures.

China has so far confirmed just three isolated outbreaks, in farms in southern Guangxi province and central Hunan and Hubei, and culled only about 200,000 chickens or ducks.

The WHO said that if the cull, which is so far Asia's main weapon against the epidemic, was not executed properly it could increase the risk of a mutation that would enable the deadly H5N1 strain to be transmitted by humans.

"If (the killing of birds) is done in such a way that exposes more people, then this ... could be increasing the risk of developing a strain that you would not want to see," its

spokesman in Geneva Dick Thompson said Thursday.

"From what we can see ... many of these culling workers are not wearing the right personal protection equipment, we are also unsure how many of these people have been vaccinated against (normal) influenza," he said.

Health experts have warned that while humans have so far only caught the disease through contact with infected birds or their droppings, it could claim millions of lives if it mutates into a more contagious form.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) also said it was vital to properly compensate poultry farmers whose flocks were destroyed.

"Compensation will be one of the key factors that will determine whether or not we stamp out these outbreaks," said the FAO's Bangkok-based regional animal health officer Hans Wagner.

"If the level of compensation is insufficient then the farmers will not carry out the culls. They may even resort to clandestinely selling the infected animals," he said.

Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, South Korea, Thailand and Vietnam have all reported outbreaks of H5N1 among poultry, while Taiwan and Pakistan have reported weaker strains of the virus.

Indonesia has come in for heavy criticism over its reluctance to carry out a mass cull to combat the epidemic which has infected millions of birds across much of its vast archipelago.

President Megawati

Sukarnoputri on Thursday ordered the immediate killing of all poultry infected with bird flu following pressure from the WHO.

But Indonesia appeared to back-track Friday as agriculture ministry spokesman Hari Priyono said it would only carry out a selective slaughter that would spare "healthy" animals at farms where infections were reported.

WHO Western Pacific spokesman Peter Cordingley said Indonesia should comply with FAO recommendations by placing a "sanitary zone or a quarantine area" around infected areas, which would require killing chickens in farms close to those with confirmed infections.

"We have to cut down on the contact level between chickens and humans," Cordingley told AFP. "It's the only way."

In Vietnam, the government said more than half its provinces and cities had now been hit by the outbreak, as authorities in Hanoi ordered the slaughter of all of the capital's one million chickens.

In Thailand alone 10.7 million chickens have been slaughtered, mostly packed into sacks and buried alive in deep pits in a hasty operation that was criticised Friday as inhumane and avoidable.

"Burying them alive is not the right way to do it," Thai Animal Guardians Association chairman Roger Lohanan told The Nation newspaper.

Thailand on Friday reported that the disease had been detected in its southern reaches for the first time, in a province linked by bridge to the resort island of Phuket.



PHOTO: STAR

Cattle crowd Dhaka markets where sales picked up yesterday, two days ahead of Eid-ul-Azha festival.

6 Saudi security men killed by militants

AFP, Riyadh

The death toll of Saudi security men shot by presumed Islamist gunmen as they searched the Riyadh home of a detained militant has risen to six, officials said yesterday.

Riyadh Governor Prince Salman bin Abdul Aziz led prayers for the six men and the father of the militant who were killed during Thursday's search in the Al-Fayhaa neighborhood of the eastern Al-Nassim district.

The interior ministry said after the shooting that five security men and the militant's father were killed and two other security personnel wounded in the attack, one of whom has since died of his injuries.

"Based on information about the existence of weapons and explosives at the place of residence of a man wanted on security charges, a (security) unit went to the place accompanied by his father" after arresting the militant in the morning, said a ministry official quoted by the state news agency SPA.

"Two hand grenades, two machine-guns and five pistols were found. As the unit was completing its task, (it came) under heavy fire from unknown elements," the official said.

Talking to reporters after the funerals, Prince Salman dismissed reports that the killings occurred during a "raid" on the house of the militant or that the security men had been involved in a gunbattle with the assailants.

"The interior ministry statement said the whole truth. There was no raid on the house and there was no exchange of fire with the criminals," said the capital's governor, who is a brother of King Fahd.

Security forces were told by the detained militant that he kept weapons at his home and went there, accompanied by his father, to search the premises, said Prince Salman, quoted by SPA.

During the search, gunmen "who may have had knowledge (of their presence) came, killing two security men and the wanted man's father at the door, then went in and killed three others, and wounded a fourth who died today plus two others."

There was "no raid as such for (the security forces) to be prepared, and not a single shot was fired by the security men," he added.

Saudi security forces clashed with gunmen in the same Al-Nassim district on January 18, and the capital's police chief subsequently said "a number of suspects" had been detained.

Security forces have repeatedly clashed with suspected Islamist militants in the past months as they hunt for presumed extremists associated with the al-Qaeda terror network.

Several security personnel have been killed in the shootouts.

Hundreds of suspected extremists have been rounded up since last May's triple bombings of residential compounds in Riyadh that killed 35 people, including eight Americans.

A car bomb went off at another expatriate housing complex in the Saudi capital in November, killing 17 people, mostly Arabs.

The latest deadly incident coincided with the gathering of some 1.7 million Muslim pilgrims amid tightened security at the holy city of Mecca in western Saudi Arabia for the annual hajj rituals which started Friday.

Hajj begins

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face.

The journey to Mina is taking place amid the tightest security measures, imposed by the Saudi authorities to ensure the safety of the near two million pilgrims.

The authorities have warned that they will not tolerate any attempt to undermine security during the Hajj. In early November they said they had foiled a plot to attack pilgrims gathered in Makkah during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan and shot dead two "terrorists."

In the Saudi capital, Riyadh, 700km from Makkah, five Saudi security men and the father of a wanted militant were shot dead by unknown gunmen during a raid on Thursday, after the militant was arrested.

Before dawn today, the faithful will move towards Mount Arafat, a revered place in Islam, for the culmination of the Hajj, symbolising the Final Judgement at the scene of the Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (SM)'s last sermon 14 centuries ago.

The faithful will then return to Mina to sacrifice an animal, generally sheep, marking Eid-ul-Azha, or feast of the sacrifice, celebrated tomorrow.

They will spend two more days in Mina to take part in a symbolic stoning of the devil.

Better life

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Shamsunnahar borrowed a loan of Tk 2,000 to start her own business. Years on, her little bakery grew. She made it bigger.

"I told them that since they took a chance with me when my business was small, why not lend me more? I want to be a big businessperson!" Shamsunnahar asserts. She got the loan -- the same loan that Nurjahan took.

Now she sells her sweets, bread, vermicelli and pastries to the big bakeries in Rangpur.

Exhibiting the three massive stoves she uses to bake her products, she indicates how smaller the tiny mud-stove she once used had been. "This is my life. It's how big my family has become with each and every loan that I took. I have made these stoves bigger so my sons and I could walk our streets in pride."

(We urge individuals and organisations to inform us about similar initiatives that we would be happy to write about. Please contact the writer at khan_ash@hotmail.com)

Bush, Blair

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independent member of Norway's parliament who nominated the two for the 2004 prize shortly after the U.S.-led war toppled Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein in April.

"Even though they haven't found those weapons they got rid of a dictator and made the world more safe," he told Reuters yesterday, sticking by the choice. "They got rid of a madman."

Saddam's alleged weapons of mass destruction were a main justification for the war. None have yet been found and Bush's National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice admitted on Thursday some pre-war intelligence was flawed.

Nobel watchers say Bush or Blair's chances of winning are close to nil. The 2002 prize went to ex-U.S. President Jimmy Carter, who argued against war. The head of the Nobel committee called the choice a "kick in the legs" to Bush on Iraq.

The 2003 prize, worth \$1.35 million, went to Iranian human rights lawyer Shirin Ebadi from a record field of 165 nominees. The annual deadline for nominations for the award, announced in October, is February 1.

Meddlesome MPs

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local government power.

During a meeting at its office in Dhaka on January 15, the association decided to hold a convention in Dhaka on February 27 and invite the prime minister to attend the function as chief guest.

"We will call upon the government to meet our demands and issue an ultimatum from the convention," said Meer Anayet Hossain Montu, president of the association.

Forty chairmen from different parts of the country were present at the meeting. "We belong to different political parties, but in order to realise our demands we have become united and decided to fight it out together," Montu said.

The association threatened work abstention and agitation by UP chairmen if the government does not respond to the demands. Montu also talked about mass resignation. "If the government does not take any steps to meet our demands, we might have to take

the decision to resign."

"Some 4,500 UP chairmen of the country have been under the whims of the lawmakers," said Abdur Razzak, chairman of Chancra union parishad of Jessore sadar.

Razzak also accused lawmakers of obstructing their activities, adding that UP chairmen do not have any control over test relief programmes, distribution of VGF (vulnerable group feeding) cards or new projects as lawmakers dominate all these areas. He and other UP chairmen also criticised the newly introduced Gram Sarkar saying the auxiliary body of the UP is actually a hindrance to the local government body.

"The government has introduced the system intentionally to destroy the UP," said Abdul Latif Mondal, chairman of Madla UP of Bogra. "Although Gram Sarkar chiefs are not elected, they become very close to the lawmakers who use them to serve their own interests."

Road mishaps kill 14

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at Ershadnagar in Tongi at 1:00pm.

In Comilla, two separate road accidents left three people killed and six others injured. The first mishap took place at Chandina on the Dhaka-Chittagong Highway at noon.

Police said a Dhaka-bound truck collided head-on with a Chandina-bound microbus and rammmed a rickshaw near Palki Cinema Hall, killing the rickshawpuller and a passenger on the spot.

Identity of the dead could not be known.

The injured, Swapan and Akbar, both motorbike riders, were admitted to Sadar Hospital in critical condition.

Another cattle-laden truck hit a man, Russel, killing him on the spot at Ichakhada on Magura-Jhenidah road.

The two accidents took place at around noon. Police seized both the trucks.

US admits flaws

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The weapons issue is a hot topic in campaigning for the November presidential election, with Democrats saying Bush misled the country over the level of the Iraqi threat.

Bush's main international ally over Iraq, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, has come under similar pressure from political opponents but Blair drew comfort on Wednesday from an independent report rejecting a BBC claim that Blair had hyped the threat from Baghdad.

The White House acknowledged last year that it had been a mistake to accuse Iraq of trying to buy African uranium. The allegation -- included in Bush's State of the Union address -- was found to have been based partly on forged documents.

"When you are dealing with secretive regimes that want to deceive, you're never going to be able to be positive" about intelligence, Rice told NBC on Thursday.

She said the US team hunting for Iraq's weapons would "gather all of the facts that we possibly can," leaving open the possibility that its findings may be inconclusive.

She blamed gaps in data on looters who sacked government offices after the invasion and on ousted Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, who she said was so secretive that "he allowed the world to continue to wonder" what weapons he still had.

Critics say the administration did little to secure sensitive sites immediately after the invasion, undercutting efforts to find the evidence of weapons.

David Kay, who had led the US team hunting for Iraq's weapons, warned on Wednesday of an "unresolved ambiguity" about Saddam's weapons capabilities partly due to the looting of documents, laboratories and military bases.

He said he would support an independent investigation into the intelligence.

Rice said the Iraq Survey Group, which is continuing to search for weapons in Iraq, should complete its work and that the intelligence community had already launched its own investigation.

Gen. John Abizaid, head of the US military's Central Command, stressed the importance of pressing on with the weapons search.

"If I did get the WMD wrong, OK, I understand that. But I can tell you that there are certain things that we got extremely right which allowed us to conduct a campaign that was pretty quick and, you know, pretty decisive in a very short period of time," he told reporters.

Rice said the administration would not change its position that Saddam had to go. "The judgment is going to be the same: This is a dangerous man in a dangerous part of the world and it was time to do something about this threat," she said.

Police nab 19 for leakage of DAE test question

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Mymensingh

Police in the town yesterday arrested 19 persons including 10 employees of the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) for their alleged involvement with question leakage for written test of Block Supervisors.

Assistant Chief (Project) of DAE Shah Alam Siddiquee Mamun has also been held for interrogation.

The arrested DAE employees are Sirajul Haque, Abdul Aziz and ATM Bokhran, Sirajul Islam, Md Zahurul Islam Mondal, Md Kitab Ali, Md Firoj Hossain, Abdul Mannan and Shahidul Islam.

Police said they arrested seven candidates and two guardians from the DAE additional director's office at Balashpur at around 3:30am when the questions with written answers were being handed over.

During the drive led by Sub-inspector Md Mansur Habib, police seized question papers and 16 hand-written answer scripts and eight admit cards. Police said they checked the questions, which were the same as on the test question papers. The test was held across the country yesterday.

A case was filed against the 19 arrestees.

Hasina

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popular leaders in Khulna."

She said more AL leaders in Khulna received death threats over telephone and through letters yesterday. People are living in utter insecurity due to criminal activities of BNP-Jamaat alliance loyalists and breakdown of law and order, she added.

The only way to end such a situation is to dislodge the alliance government, Hasina stressed.

Asked how her party would prevent attacks on its leaders and activists, the AL chief said, "We don't believe in politics of violence and our party is always working to build a democratic atmosphere."

Some central leaders of the party accompanied Hasina during her visit to the DMCH.

Fresh bomb attack

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general secretary of Sonadanga unit of the AL, was severely injured when assailants hurled three powerful bombs at him on Haji Ismail Road in the city.

The killing of Khulna city AL president Manzurul Imam last year and New Age newsman Manik Chandra Saha on January 15 sent shock waves across Bangladesh.

CNG driver

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Bangladesh Clinic and to Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) where the doctors declared him dead.

The licence of the vehicle, issued to one Bachchu Miah, was without any photograph and might not be the victim's, said DMCH sources.

Locals handed over the muggers to Gulshan police, who said they were Mijan, 22, Shahin, 25, and Abul Kashem, 20.

Study on to unravel mystery disease

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Experts investigating viral infection in Goaland, Rajbari, Manikganj and Tangail are yet to unravel the mystery disease that claimed at least 19 lives in two weeks triggering panic in the affected areas.

According to health directorate officials in Dhaka, experts at the Centre for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta in the United States are now examining the tissue (hair, blood, skin, saliva and cough) samples collected from the areas.

They will require more time to arrive at a conclusion on the virus, they added.

"It is a very sophisticated virus and it takes a longer time to isolate it and study its nature," said Dr Mahbubur Rahman, line director of Essential Service Package and director of Primary Healthcare of the health directorate.

He said the government was concerned over the nature of infection. "It was scattered and attacked a few in a large population although many more exposed people were not affected," Mahbubur said.

Five health experts -- Eric Barthérette, Alice Croisier, Joel Montgomery, Kathy Henlon and Derrim Carroll -- from the World Health Organisation (WHO) headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland and CDC are expected to arrive on Sunday to step up ongoing investigation into the infection.

But the final findings would not be available before Monday, health officials said.

Obituary

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Vadanta Budhinal Mohathero of Bangladesh Hindu Bouddha Christian Oikya Parishad died of a cardiac arrest at the Dharmarajik Buddhist Maha Vihar at Kamalapur yesterday. He was 68.

His body will be kept at Kamalapur Buddhist monastery till this noon for the visitors to pay their last respects, said Suddhananda Mohathero, head of the monastery.

Later, the body will be taken to his birthplace at Shakpura, Boalkhali, in Chittagong, for funeral.

He was a residential monk in Bangladesh Bouddha Kristi Prachar Sangha for more than 35 years.

Miscreants loot house in Laxmipur

UNB, Laxmipur

At least 10 people were injured when a gang of miscreants attacked a house at Raipur upazila headquarters yesterday.

The gang, allegedly led by Zakir Hossain, stormed into the house of Tafari Begum in the morning, beat up the inmates and looted valuables worth about Tk 25 lakh.

It was alleged that the miscreants also kidnapped two relatives of Tafari.

Tafari along with her family members at a press conference at the district press club yesterday evening alleged that the miscreants also attacked them on Thursday.

"We went to the local police station to file a case, but police refused to accept the case," they alleged.

When contacted, officer-in-charge of Raipur Police Station said he was aware of the incident.

Home-bound

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Saidabad echoed the same allegation, saying he had to pay Tk 250, whereas the normal fare is Tk 160.

Some passengers expressed despair at the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority's (BRTA) fare chart that they said showed higher fares than normal.

But bus operators defended themselves, saying their vehicles returned to Dhaka from distant destinations without passengers and they were not charging fares higher than the BRTA rates.

A ticket seller of MV Nusrat-2 said: "We are charging a flat rate of Tk 150 from deck passengers for Borguna. But look at the BIWTA chart that fixes the fare at Tk 189."

Another staff of the launch said, "Normally we charge Tk 100 a passenger."

Launch cabin passengers are paying double the normal fares of Tk 250 for a single and Tk 500 for a double cabin.

Streams of passengers were leaving Dhaka yesterday from Saidabad, Mohakhali and Gabtoli bus terminals where buses were parked scattered presenting a drag on normal movement, despite activities of mobile courts at all terminals.

Allegations of silent extortion of money in the name of tips were also rife at bus terminals.

The chaos and confusion at bus and launch terminals will grow when the three-day Eid holiday begins on Sunday, transport operators said.

Mizan murder

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bathroom pipe -- his legs touching the floor and mouth shut in what she described as hallmarks of murder.

Sheuli accused an unnamed group of trying to dub the incident as suicide, adding: "The killers don't want to acknowledge the role of an honest, dedicated officer."

"Half an hour into the recovery of the body, his colleagues pretended not to recognise him, although he had worked with them for long," she said, adding policemen showed them Rahman's visiting card as proof of his identity to faked surprise of his colleagues.

Sheuli said the director general of the fisheries department had threatened Rahman by phone on January 15 for signing a file.

"A relative went to Matsya Bhaban and heard some staff whispering he was murdered, but the high officials called it suicide," she said.

Other members of Rahman's family including his mother Shamsun Nahar, attending the press conference, echoed Sheuli's allegation.

They said they are yet to get the autopsy report from Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Rahman joined the civil service 10 years ago.

Try killers

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Mofiz and tenant of Suhara, and Zahar, a relative of Mofiz -- both absconding.

The 30-year-old housewife was gang-raped and strangled on Tuesday and police recovered her body from the kitchen of her residence on Titas Gas Road at Palashpur.

Her brother-in-law filed a murder case with Shyampur Police Station accusing three persons including Mofiz and Zahar.

Mofiz, brother-in-law of Abul, was arrested at Motijheel on Thursday.