

Deadly threat of bird flu: Regional response essential



HARUN UR RASHID

At a recent 80-nation conference on the detection and prevention of bird flu, the delegates pleaded with the world's governments not to cover up outbreaks of bird flu in their countries. China was accused of covering up SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) making it more difficult to combat a disease which spread around the world, killing some 800 people and infecting more than 8,000.

Chickens and ducks are infected first with deadly virus from migrating wild birds. Once poultry is infected, they are to be destroyed because the virus can mutate and infect human beings who are close to poultry farms.

In recent days, bird flu has occurred in Romania and Turkey. Both the countries have culled millions of chickens. The EU has banned any import of birds from Turkey and Romania. In Latin America, Columbia has reported its first human case of infection.

How the outbreak unfolded in various countries:

April 5: The UN says that H7 strain of bird flu has been found in South Korea, previously undetected in Asia.

July 20: Indonesia confirms its first deaths from bird flu

August 10: The virus is found in Tibet, a world animal body says.

August 15: Russia reports an outbreak of bird flu in the Ural regions

August 23: An outbreak of the H5N1 bird flu strain in found in Kazakhstan

October 8: Turkey reports its first cases of bird flu

October 13: A strain of bird flu H5 has been detected in Romanian ducks

Virus may jump from chickens to humans

The World Health Organisation (WHO) fears a mutation of the bird flu (avian flu) virus could spark a worldwide epidemic among humans, similar to the Spanish flu outbreak, which claimed between 40 and 50 millions of lives after the World War I. The children and elderly are most vulnerable.

Experts say that the possibility of a worldwide epidemic (pandemic) is

about 10 per cent and they do not know whether it may occur this year or next year or in the next few years.

At the moment, humans pick up bird flu from bird faeces, blood or mucus and in a few documented cases -- notably in Thailand and Hong Kong -- appear to have passed it on to humans through their own faeces or blood.

Human and bird flu, if they combine, will create a new deadly virus and it may probably first occur where humans live with ducks and chickens.

straight from birds to humans raised deep concerns among scientists. The re-creation of the Spanish flu virus in the US will reveal why the 1918 pandemic flu was so devastating.

Scientists collected fragments of the virus from lung tissue taken from victims at the time and preserved in formalin or in one case, isolated from the lungs of a woman whose body had become frozen in the Alaskan permafrost. Using the fragments, they painstakingly pieced together and read the complete genetic code before

South Asian region

Despite worldwide concern about the spread of bird flu to jumping to humans, many South Asian nations appear not to have greeted the potential threat with gravity and are taking little visible or public awareness action, increasing the odds that a global pandemic could ignite in South Asia.

In Bangladesh, the experts agree a flu pandemic is much more likely to step off a plane in the form of people,

association with WHO to protect people in the SAARC region.

Furthermore the SAARC Secretariat may take initiative to hold a conference of veterinary surgeons of SAARC countries to examine and plan strategies to fight bird flu in the region. No country is an island at present and sooner or later the bird flu may appear in South Asia.

This raises the question of whether the region needs a medicines stockpile to cope with severe and unusual disease risks. One advantage would be to better manage the distribution of limited resources while sharing costs.

Conclusion

Political leadership will be essential in making any initiatives work in South Asia. As the nations in South Asia develop closer ties within the SAARC set-up, we need to push the thinking on those challenges that could threaten not only lives but also future prosperity. Just over two years ago, SARS caused economic damage measured in the tens of billions of dollars, with the livelihood of many thousands affected.

It is noted that security including human security does not start at our borders and that we have an interest in ensuring the region manages pandemic effectively.

Barister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

BOTTOM LINE

In Bangladesh, the experts agree a flu pandemic is much more likely to step off a plane in the form of people, traveling to and from other parts of the world, than land on the wings of wild migrating birds. To prevent or at least minimise the risk of a pandemic in Bangladesh will involve working very closely with our neighbours. A meeting of Health Ministers of SAARC and health experts needs to be held (if not already held), to consider plans and strategies in close association with WHO to protect people in the SAARC region.

It has been reported that the virus H5N1 is already mutating to make it more suited to humans.

In Thailand, a 26 year-old woman died last year after "prolonged face-to-face exposure" with her infected daughter. In May this year, the WHO reported "changes in the epidemiological patterns are consistent with the possibility that recently emerging virus H5N1 may be more infectious for humans."

Pandemic may cost 150 million lives

Experts say pandemics are ruled by mathematics; by the density of people living in cities, as demonstrated in pandemics of 1918. Last year, the WHO predicted that a pandemic could cost 100 million lives and last week the UN raised the figure to 150 million.

The danger is that existing flu vaccine does not work because it is not geared to bird flu strains. The virus H5N1 may genetically mix with human flu and evolve to such a point that it can be passed on by sneezing, which would be the start of a pandemic.

Another danger is virus H5N1 has been found to mutate in human beings. The widely-used antiviral drug Tamiflu that is used against virus H5N1 has not been effective in some cases of infected human beings because of mutation.

Search for vaccine

The finding that Spanish flu came

using the sequence to rebuild the virus.

While the researchers argue the work will hugely improve in producing vaccine against viruses, the critics say there is real danger the virus will escape, with potentially disastrous consequences. Viruses have escaped from laboratories before. During the recent SARS outbreak, the virus escaped at least twice, once in Taiwan and once in Singapore, when researchers became contaminated.

US plan

The US authorities have set up quarantine booths at almost all international airports to screen all passengers from Asia to prevent bird flu in the country.

President Bush said on 4th October that he was concerned about the danger of bird flu poses to the world. He indicated that the US military might get involved to quarantine infected areas of the US.

This is the second time in recent weeks that the President has suggested Congress pass special legislation to allow the US military to by-pass the state-controlled National Guard to perform what amounts to civilian policing, which has been unlawful in the US for almost 80 years.

That President Bush raised the issue of a military-enforced quarantine in the event of a bird flu epidemic shows that health authorities are increasingly concerned a worldwide epidemic would inevitably strike the US.

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Nobel peace prize, Dr. Elbaradei and IAEA

DR. MAINUDDIN AHMED

The 2005 Noble Peace Prize was awarded to Dr.

Mohamed ElBaradei, the Director General and his organisation International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), more popularly known as "UN Nuclear Watchdog" for their works against nuclear proliferation. A former professional staff member, consultant, expert and fellow of this organisation for last four decades, I feel proud of not only directly working and associated with this organisation but also having the opportunity of knowing the Directors General Dr. Eklund (a Swedish nuclear engineer), Dr. Hans Blix (former Swedish Foreign Minister and lawyer) and Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei (an Egyptian and lawyer) who lead the IAEA for most of its existence. I am also much pleased to read an editorial by The Daily Star on 9 October 2005 on this subject. The nature of the work of this UN Organisation made it much discussed, debated, controversial, but it is the mandated service that is being rendered should be considered by the international community. The IAEA staff members are a group of very hard working, sincere and most able people in the field of their expertise recruited from over 70 countries. This recognition will give inspiration to them and uplift their morale. Therefore, I thank The Daily Star, because the Agency also has done much for the development of science and technology in Bangladesh and I think the editorial in a way is the recognition of our media of the contribution of the Agency as per its statute.

Of course the most important task of the IAEA is to control the proliferation of the nuclear energy for destructive purposes, but in addition it has other important activities like in the field of health, food, agriculture and industry for the benefit of human beings. Its member states, including Bangladesh, are greatly benefited from the assistance of IAEA. Therefore, I wish to state that this organisation is not only the "Nuclear Watchdog", but it has also an elaborate programme on various aspects to

promote the peaceful application of nuclear energy as stipulated in its statute.

The IAEA, which came into being on 29 July, 1957, is an independent intergovernmental organisation within the United Nations System. Headquartered in Vienna, Austria, the Agency has 138 Member States who together work to carry out the main objectives of IAEA Statute: The IAEA Statute states "The Agency shall seek to accelerate and enlarge the contribution of atomic energy to peace, health, and prosperity throughout the world and ensure so far as it is able that assistance provided by it, or at its request or under its supervision or control, is not used in such a way as to further any military purpose". As per the Statute the Agency is authorised to encourage and assist research on the development and the practical application of atomic energy and make provisions for materials, services, equipment and facilities to meet the need of research on, and development and practical application of atomic energy, foster the exchange of scientific and technical information, establish and administer safeguards and establish and adopt standards of safety for the protection of health and minimisation of the danger of life and property.

It is evident from the statute that peaceful application means not in health, food and agriculture but in nuclear power as well. Currently over 30 countries have power reactors that supply electricity in their national grid. Among them France has the highest percentage (over 76%) of electricity in the national grid from its nuclear power reactors. In Asian region more than one third of electricity is supplied to the national grid of Japan and Republic of Korea by the nuclear power reactors. Both of them have more reactors under construction. Is it not a paradox that the only country which experienced the nuclear havoc and is in the forefront of the fight against nuclearisation for military purpose is also in the forefront of the peaceful application of nuclear energy? Because Japan has no other significant domestic commer-

cial source of energy. Both for cost-benefits and environmental friendliness Japan and Korea opted for nuclear energy. Their nuclear reactors are under strict safeguard control of the Agency like other NPT signatory states. The Agency has a small office in Tokyo for this purpose.

The Nobel Committee's decision to award IAEA on the 60 years after the United States dropped bombs on

Although from 1990s when his close associate and DDG of the IAEA late Professor Jefferer was in charge of the inspection in Iraq, after his retirement, Dr. Blix had all the results of inspection during his tenure as DG. As an informed person, he could not establish the claims of invaders that North Korea. North Korea has strong allies like China and Russia. Now Mr. Saddam had WMD. He is a man of strong determination and will and maintained neutrality all through in

ElBaradei nor his colleagues get solace from this declaration. He is constantly standing on a thin rope, like his predecessors. Currently it appears that there is cooling down of pressure on him concerning nuclear issues of North Korea. North Korea has strong allies like China and Russia. Now Mr. Bush's pressure is faced by the DG concerning the nuclear issues in Iran. Finally Bush's European allies have

this heavily pressurised low budgeted UN Organisation and its DG in awarding the Peace Prize which will give great inspiration to them.

I go a little back in the years following the dissolution of USSR in 1990. The new 14 states appeared from the former USSR in East Europe and Central Asia. They are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia,

activities for the service of its member states. The IAEA is also the largest publisher of the technical materials in the UN system. The current recognition will go a long way giving inspiration and motivating its staff members in rendering enhanced services to its member states. I did not mention some nuclear accidents around the world, particularly the Chernobyl Nuclear Reactor meltdown on 26 April, 1984. That mess was also successfully handled by the IAEA as per its mandate.

At the outset I have mentioned that IAEA supports a number of activities related to health, food, agriculture and industry. The IAEA is the only organisation in the UN system that financially supports research in nuclear science and technology through its coordinated research programmes directly awarding to the scientists of the member states after they are officially being processed, and runs a laboratory in Monaco and other in Seibersdorf, Austria to train scientists from developing countries and supports their activities. One of the important contributions in the health sector is the development of nuclear medicine in its developing member states. Bangladesh is greatly benefited by the IAEA's technical assistance through receiving fellowships for training, experts and equipment. These benefits, particularly in the field of nuclear medicine, have been extended by the Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission to the major cities and towns in the country. Processes for the preservation of food by radiation and sterilisation of medical supplies and products are also developed with the technical assistance of the IAEA. The processes have been tried in pilot scale successfully. They are waiting to be commercialised by private entrepreneurs.

Bangladesh is also reaping the benefits of the introduction of high yielding varieties of crops developed through low dose of radiation by Bangladesh Institute of Nuclear Agriculture in Mymensingh. A large portion of the HYV is developed throughout the world through mutation breeding with radiation. The

FAO/IAEA Laboratory of the International Atomic Energy Agency in Seibersdorf, Austria is playing a pioneering role including research in molecular biology and biotechnology and giving short and long term training to developing country scientists. Non-destructive testing is a routine procedure to detect faults in gas lines such as in Titas Gas, steel mills, Bangladesh Biman, etc. BAEC has developed and perfected the technology and trained the technicians of the end users under the technical assistance of the IAEA. My above submission is to give a short account on the other activities of the Agency which is not normally covered by the media, in order to elucidate that in addition to control the spread of nuclear weapons and materials, IAEA is conducting commendable activities for the immediate benefits of human beings.

Bangladesh is a Member State of IAEA since 1972. She is participating in most of the activities of it relevant to our national interest. We are signatory to NPT, although our neighbours are not. We are also signatory to some of the other IAEA's treaties and agreements. It is evident from the above report that our programmes on the application of nuclear technology are heavily indebted to IAEA. The first computer in then Pakistan was established in 1964 in the campus of the Atomic Energy Centre, Dhaka. The development of computer science is also supported by the Agency. We, the nuclear scientists of Bangladesh, should congratulate this outstanding and unique recognition of the Agency by the Nobel Committee, share joy with this Organisation and look forward to its continued assistance in the practical application of nuclear science and technology in Bangladesh.

Dr. Mainuddin Ahmed is a former professional staff member of the IAEA.

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Hiroshima and Nagasaki shows that it thoroughly evaluated the mandates of this Nuclear Watchdog. Because the very word "atomic" or "nuclear" is perceived by a common man with atomic bomb, and atomic/nuclear power is definitely an evil thing. Therefore, the name International Atomic Energy Agency does not go well with the perception of the uninformed public, unlike the names of the sister organisations WHO, FAO and ILO or even the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) sharing the same building complex in UN City, Vienna, Austria. Most of the IAEA's lifetime Dr. Eklund and Dr. Blix persistently worked hard to uplift the image of the Agency through their unbiased approach on this subject resisting the influence of big powers. Their able successor Dr. ElBaradei along with his hard working, honest and earnest colleagues are continuing the same path that brought him and his organisation the greatest honour of today's world -- the Nobel Prize.

Dr. Hans Blix was in the helm of the affairs during the turbulent period of 1990 (Gulf War) and before and after the Iraq invasion by Mr. Bush and Mr. Blair; and as UN Chief Inspector he looked for the Saddam's weapons of mass destruction.



Dr. ElBaradei

spite of great pressure from USA. The mandated unbiased activities of the past and present DG and their staff members made the Nobel Committee's decision in favour of Dr. ElBaradei and his organisation.

Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei is a close associate (former director of IAEA) and an able successor of Dr. Blix. As the empty cries of Mr. Bush and Mr. Blair are being continued, they are exposed to the world community by the published report of Dr. Blix and by his personal appearance in media and the UN that till present WMD does not exist in Iraq. However, neither Dr.

joined in his chorus and currently India, supposed to be a spokesman of non-aligned nations and traditional friend of Iran stood behind the USA. Iran being the victim of injustice as per IAEA statute sees a ray of hope as Russia and China might stand by her. The next IAEA Board of Governors will decide whether to place the issue to Security Council for sanction against Iran. I could feel what is happening in Vienna at this moment. Although it rests on the members of the Board, it is Dr. ElBaradei who will have all the pressures and the agonies. The Nobel Committee has done a great service to

Lithuania, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan, of course in addition to Russia. With the exception of Azerbaijan, Moldova and Turkmenistan rest of the 11 states have nuclear activities including mining. They were not in safeguard and security position as prevailed in USSR period. The IAEA the only UN organisation mandated to look after all the nuclear and nuclear related activities around world had and has the sacred tasks assisting these states to control their nuclear reactors and materials and brought all the 14 states under its Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) by 1997. Some internal conflicts are going on in some of the states.

International community is worried about trafficking nuclear materials and terrorism, particularly after the 9/11 attack on Twin Towers in New York. The IAEA organised a symposium on these subjects in November, 2001. Although it was planned well before 9/11, a special session on nuclear terrorism was held. As of 2002 the IAEA recorded 175 cases of illicit trafficking involving nuclear materials. In fact this area is the main thrust of the activities of IAEA. One could imagine how for last 60 years the IAEA is strenuously rendering its

IN MEMORIAM

Dr Zohra Begum Kazi

The Florence Nightingale of Dhaka

MUHAMMAD MURAD LATIF

THE first Bengali Muslim female doctor of the then undivided Bengal, Professor Dr Zohra Begum Kazi, was born on October 15, 1912, at Ranjangaon, Madhya Pradesh, India. Her father, late Dr. Kazi Abdus Sattar was also a renowned physician and a political personality of the sub-continent who hailed from the famous Kazi family of Gopalpur village under Kalkini upazila of Madaripur district. He was a close associate of Mahatma Gandhi, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Maulana Shaukat Ali, Jawaharlal Nehru, Ballabh Bhai Patel, Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Haq, and many other personalities of that time.

Prof Dr Zohra Begum Kazi was married to late Razuddin Bhuiyan (MLC) (MP), the only son of the zamindar of Hiatirdia under Raipur Upazilla of Narsingdi district. He was also a dedicated social worker and renowned politician.

Her eldest brother late Prof. Kazi Ashraf Mahmud was a famous Hindi poet and a close associate of Comrade Muzaffar Ahmed, Ramdas Gandhi (son of Mahatma Gandhi), and our national poet Kazi Nazrul Islam. He was a founder member of All India Communist Party. He retired as Professor of Botany Department, Dhaka University.

Her only youngest sister late Dr. Shirin Kazi was also a renowned physician, poet, and columnist. She was the first Bengali Muslim female doctor to obtain DRCOG degree from London in 1951.

Prof Dr Zohra Begum Kazi had her early education from different places of the then undivided India. She matriculated with distinction from Muslim Girls Collegiate High School, Aligarh in 1928. After passing intermediate with distinction from Aligarh Muslim University and College in 1930, she obtained MBBS degree in 1935 from Lady Harding Medical College for Women, Delhi. She stood First Class First and was awarded the Viceroy's Medal for her meritorious achievement in MBBS final Examination.

Prof Dr. Zohra Begum Kazi served in different hospitals of British India as assistant surgeon for thirteen years. After partition in 1947 she

came back to her ancestral home and joined Dhaka Medical College and Hospital in 1948 as resident surgeon and settled in Dhaka. She was a cyclist, table tennis, and badminton player. Other than her mother tongue, she could also read, write, and speak Hindi, Urdu, Arabic and English fluently.

Prof Dr Zohra Begum Kazi was a brilliant student. She received stipends and full scholarships throughout her educational career



up to post graduate studies in the UK starting right from primary school. She was awarded scholarship in 1955 and successfully obtained DRCOG degree from London and completed her FCPS. Prof Dr Zohra Begum Kazi also successfully obtained FRCOG and MRCOG degrees from London and joined Dhaka Medical College and Hospital as professor and Head of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology. During her long and illustrious career she served, among other things, as senior consultant of Holy Family Red Crescent Hospital, CMH, and Dhaka Cantonment (with the rank of honorary colonel), and as honorary professor, Bangladesh Medical College.

During her long service in Dhaka Medical College and Hospital, Prof Dr Zohra Begum Kazi was shocked and disturbed at the plight and sufferings of female patients who were ignorant of modern allopathic medicine and treatment. They were usually very shy and not accustomed to seeking outdoor medical assistance in male

dominated hospitals. The mortality rate amongst female patients was extremely high during that time. To mitigate their sufferings, she often used to visit door to door of female patients and motivated them to leave behind age old rites, beliefs and superstitions, and encouraged them to come out of their house to seek medical treatment and assistance, to save both mother and child, which eventually yielded positive response from the long neglected women folk of the then backward society. She was a pioneer in women's education and emancipation who played a pivotal role in imparting education to women in medical science, which substantially increased the number of enrollment of girl students in MBBS course.

Prof. Dr. Zohra Begum Kazi was a dedicated physician who attained the highest degree of professional excellence. She was honest, sincere, and devoted to her sacred duties, and was punctual in her noble profession like the rhythm of a clock. Her philosophy was "humane behaviour, benevolent approach, patience, friendly caring, devotion and dedicated service to mankind" which she professed, taught, and maintained throughout her long professional life. She was awarded Taghma-e-Pakistan in 1964. She was also awarded the Begum Rokeya Padak in 2002 by the Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia.

A social reformer like Prof Dr Zohra Begum Kazi may not come often. She came like a ray of light to enlighten the backward Bengali nation in those dark days. By dint of her selfless devotion and dedicated and relentless effort she reached the pinnacle of her profession. She never ran after wealth, name, and fame. She used to say to her medical pupils, "Don't run after money -- money will run after you -- and be sincere to your noble profession." She will be remembered by the nation for her unforgettable contribution. For her selfless and dedicated service to humanity she ought to have been called the Florence Nightingale of Bangladesh. May Almighty Allah grant her long life.