

EU states downplay risk as bird flu spreads toward Western Europe

By Dragan Stankovic
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The discovery of avian influenza, or bird flu, among migratory birds and domestic poultry in Siberia during July has triggered fears that the virus will reach Western Europe. Despite warnings by many scientists that bird flu could mutate and cause a global pandemic, sharp divisions emerged among European Union (EU) member states over whether to take action to stem the spread of the virus.

During April, 6,000 dead birds, all infected with H5N1 avian flu, were found on Lake Qinghai in Western China. From there, the virus has spread to the outskirts of Lhasa, the capital of Tibet; to western Mongolia; and to chickens and wild fowl near the Siberian capital of Novosibirsk. There have also been outbreaks in poultry in the last several months in Japan and South Korea.

If the virus continues to spread, then there is a possibility that birds migrating from European Russia could spread avian flu to free-range poultry in Western Europe. Birds from Lake Qinghai may also carry the virus to the Indian subcontinent and infect other species that migrate to Europe.

Denmark, northern Germany and the Netherlands run the highest risk. The Dutch government has taken immediate precautions. In 2003, the spread of a strain of avian flu in the country was only brought under control by the slaughter of 30 million chickens. Eighty-nine people, mostly poultry workers and their close contacts, became infected. One person, a veterinarian, died of pneumonia.

In order to prevent another crisis, Dutch farmers have been instructed to keep free-range birds under cover, to protect domestic poultry from contact with wild birds infected by the virus. German farmers have been told to do the same by September 15.

The Dutch policy has been sharply opposed by other

EU members, particularly the French and British governments. The divisions are so deep that the EU executive announced that its lawyers are investigating if the Netherlands government has broken EU laws by taking unilateral action.

At a meeting of European agriculture and veterinary officials on August 25, claims were made that bird flu had only a remote chance of striking the EU in the immediate future. Francois Moutou, a veterinarian with the French Agency for Food Safety, declared there was little danger of migratory birds spreading bird flu to Europe as infected birds in Asia would not fly very far. The British Department for Food and Rural Affairs said the risk was too low to warrant a ban on keeping free-range birds outside.

Other speakers insisted the EU had sufficient protection due to a ban on the import of live poultry from Russia and Kazakhstan and nine Asian countries—Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, North Korea, Pakistan, Thailand and Vietnam.

While not openly stated at the conference, the opposition to the steps taken by the Dutch government was motivated by short-term economic considerations. Enclosing free-range poultry across Europe would be costly and logistically demanding. Some 25 percent of the British egg-laying flock is free-range, for example, and generates £350m a year. At least 10 percent of chickens raised for meat are also kept outdoors.

In the final analysis, the EU position is based on the gamble that avian flu will not spread. Bird flu developed first in South East Asia, where it wreaked havoc on the region's poultry industry. The outbreak of the virulent H5N1 strain since 2003 has led to the slaughter of 150 million poultry. More than 112 people have contracted the virus due to close contact with

infected animals. Sixty-two people have died. The majority of victims have been in Vietnam and Thailand, but there have been cases in Cambodia and Indonesia.

In Vietnam, Indonesia and China, where the disease is now entrenched, governments have carried out expensive and difficult bird vaccination campaigns to try and eradicate the virus. New cases have continued to surface nevertheless.

In sharp contrast to the complacency at the EU meeting, Samuel Jutzi, the head of Animal Protection and Health at the Rome-based Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), told a news conference on September 1 that avian flu would spread. "Now that the winter is coming, the risk is expanding rather fast into areas of eastern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa," he said. "There's no reason whatever to believe that this geographic expansion will finish in Kazakhstan." Western Europe could face widespread infections next year, he warned.

The longer avian flu continues, and the further it spreads, the greater the danger it could mutate into a deadly strain that transmits directly from human to human and for which no vaccinations are widely available. Health experts have warned of a crisis on the scale of the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918, which killed between 20 and 50 million people. The ease of international travel today could see a comparable virus spread rapidly to every corner of the globe.

The World Health Organisation and the FAO both insist that what is required is a concerted campaign to prevent the spread of infection among poultry and thus cut the chances of a human-to-human mutation emerging. "Looking back, the main problems in Asia were late reporting, lack of transparency, and lack of having contingency plans available," said Hans Wagner, a Bangkok-based FAO expert.

A wait-and-see approach, however, is precisely what is being proposed by the European Union. At the same time, the major powers are giving only minimal assistance to the Asian countries struggling to contain the virus. Earlier in the year, WHO reported at a conference in Vietnam that it had received just \$US18 million of the \$100 million it had requested to combat bird flu. At the same conference, the organisation increased its estimate of how much money was required to \$300 million.

Some health analysts and medical experts are saying it may already be too late to prevent a human bird flu pandemic. Doctor Jai P. Nairan, the director of the World Health Organisation's communicable diseases department, told a news conference on September 7: "We may be at almost the last stage before the pandemic virus may emerge. Whether the avian influenza pandemic will occur, that is not the question anymore, it is when the pandemic will occur."

Australian health agencies have already drawn up contingency plans for an epidemic involving five million infections, or a quarter of the population, the hospitalisation of 150,000 people and between 13,000 and 44,000 deaths, in a time frame of just two months. A stockpile of anti-viral drugs has been built up, but it is intended primarily to assist one million people who are classified as "emergency workers" to ward off the flu until a vaccine can be developed.

The impact in underdeveloped countries, which lack the resources to finance even the token measures being taken in countries like Australia, would be far worse. The most likely response of the major powers if a pandemic does develop will be to leave the poorest and most vulnerable to their fate. Alan Hampson, the deputy director of the WHO Collaborating Centre for Reference and Research on Influenza in the Australian city of Melbourne, told the *Australian* newspaper this month: "We're very conscious that in a true global crisis, countries would have to look after themselves, at least initially, because it's likely countries would close their borders."

If a similar rate of infection as is projected in Australia unfolded in the European Union, a bird flu pandemic would affect over 60 million people, hospitalise over two million and claim the lives of up to 600,000 people.

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