

Bird flu threat grows in Europe and Africa

By Andreas Reiss
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Cases of Asiatic bird flu are spreading in Germany and other European states, but no governmental authorities—at either the national, state or local levels—seem to have developed serious plans to deal with this fully foreseeable crisis.

When, in early February, proof of the epidemic was found for the first time in the bodies of several dead swans on the German island of Rügen, the reaction of the authorities could only be described as negligent. Days passed before overburdened local officials were able to manage the collection and disposal of the dead creatures.

At the time, it was not known how many of the birds had succumbed to bird flu—the H5N1 pathogene that is also deadly for humans—and how many had died from cold, hunger or other causes. It appeared that no one in authority on Rügen or in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania wished to provide an accurate account of the scale of the outbreak out of concern that the island's tourism trade would suffer, causing yet another painful setback to the region's extremely fragile economic situation.

It was not announced until February 14 that the hump-beaked swans, found dead on February 8, were suspected of having been infected with H5N1. Not until February 19, after criticism from political circles and the media, was a state of emergency proclaimed for the county of Rügen. Prompted the day before by an inquiry from federal Agricultural and Consumer Protection Minister Horst Seehofer, County Administrator Kerstin Kassner, a member of the Left Party, called a press conference to announce that she had the situation under control.

In view of the significance of the outbreak of H5N1, the response by the public authorities was entirely inadequate. For days, the location where the dead birds were found remained unquarantined, even though the carcasses could have carried “massive deposits of the virus,” according to a statement from Thomas Mettenleiter, president of the Friedrich Löffler Institute.

Passers-by, dogs and even members of the press could have unknowingly come into contact with the virus, become infected and passed it on to poultry farms. According to some reports, authorities granted cameramen permission to

access poultry-breeding firms directly after they filmed the dead birds being packed into plastic bags.

The extent of the current outbreak in Germany remains unclear. The known number of infections is believed to be in the hundreds, but initially, birds were transported to incineration plants without any proper examination. It is possible that more birds were infected with H5N1 than officially reported.

In the meantime, the virus strain has turned up in a number of German states, including Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Baden-Württemberg, Schleswig-Holstein and Brandenburg. Alarmingly, bird flu has also been detected in a domestic cat in Germany and in a small weasel-like animal on the island of Rügen known as the stone marten.

Repeated assurances that the virus epidemic affects only animals and the danger for humans is extremely slight are dubious. The H5N1 strain has killed at least 95 people since 2003, mostly in Asia, according to the World Health Organisation, and it has devastated poultry stocks.

Indonesia raised its human death toll to 21 last week, acknowledging that lab tests confirmed the virus had killed a 3-year-old boy who died February 28 after contact with sick chickens. This figure is only for confirmed cases. There may well be unrecorded cases of other human deaths.

In stark contrast to the complacent tone of politicians and the media was the alarming appearance of federal troops on the island of Rügen. Four days after the announcement of a suspected outbreak of bird flu, the military sent special ABC forces to the island. An initial reconnaissance party was followed by operational troops. Camouflaged special units combed beaches and reed pools, while military aircraft were on the lookout for dead birds.

The military intervention, in seeming contradiction to official assurances, gave new impetus to the ongoing controversy in Germany concerning an expansion of the Army's powers to deploy troops domestically—a development welcomed in political and media circles that have been pushing for a greater role for the military in civilian affairs.

In France, the situation has since further escalated. Some 400 of the 11,000 chickens on a poultry farm in the

department of Ain near Lyon have died from H5N1 infection. It is assumed that the birds caught the infection from straw that had been strewn in the open and attracted wild ducks.

France has announced it intends to vaccinate large numbers of poultry stock. Three million doses of vaccination were acquired after the European Union (EU) gave the green light for vaccination to begin on February 22.

Vaccination of poultry is controversial for legitimate reasons. Many scientists expressly warn against it, arguing that vaccinated birds can carry the H5N1 virus and spread it further. However, they do not become ill with bird flu, and this makes the detection of infected birds all the more difficult. An infection that leaves no symptoms can be confirmed only through the most elaborate diagnostic methods. A vaccinated stock of poultry can thus become a virtual reservoir of the H5N1 virus.

The situation at Ain constitutes the first occurrence of the epidemic in commercial livestock within the EU. It indicates that a virus of epidemic proportions, extending across nearly the whole continent, can develop within a few days from an apparently locally confined outbreak. Austria, Switzerland and Italy have already been affected. It can be assumed that a further infection of poultry stock will follow. Migratory birds will soon be returning from their winter quarters in Africa, and it is considered likely that many of them will be carrying the virus.

The situation in Africa appears to be completely out of control. H5N1 has been spreading in Nigeria since the beginning of February. The entire continent appears to have been affected by the epidemic, but it is unclear exactly how far it has spread.

An effective campaign against the epidemic in Africa confronts the same obstacles as in regions such as Asia and Turkey: the poverty of the population, the lack of education and understanding of the dangers, and the widespread deficiencies of infrastructure necessary for epidemic control. Consequently, most African states would be utterly helpless in the event of an outbreak of bird flu, even if it is initially confined to a particular area.

In no sense can it be said that the recent occurrences of the virus were unexpected. On February 9, the online edition of *Die Zeit* said the following: "The truth is that World Hunger Aid and other organisations have been warning against an outbreak of the epidemic on the African continent for a long time. Chicken meat is an important commodity in the economy, particularly for the poor in many parts of Africa. Above all, it constitutes their main source of animal protein. This is why poultry can be found fluttering behind almost every house or hut. If this basic nutritional requirement is eliminated by a flu epidemic, Africans will be threatened

with catastrophe."

World Hunger Aid conveyed this warning to *Die Zeit Online* in December. In addition to its millions of private poultry owners, Nigeria relies on the poultry business as an important commercial sector, and this would presumably collapse in the wake of an uncontrolled epidemic, according to the German newspaper.

Apart from economic consequences that could be devastating for Africa and considerable for some European states, humanity as a whole is confronted by the danger of a worldwide H5N1 pandemic. Two alarming scenarios present themselves. On the one hand, the bird flu virus strain could "cross over" to one of the types of flu virus affecting humans. On the other, there could be a slow, spontaneous mutation or evolution of the pathogene, developing finally into a virus deadly to humans.

In either case, the chances of such a new type of virus appearing will drastically increase with the infection of vast numbers of birdlife. If the virus happened to mutate so that it could cross from human to human, it would still require the close contact of other humans to the so-called "patient number one." His or her infection would then become the source of a pandemic spreading rapidly throughout the world. This is the most alarming, but entirely plausible, scenario.

Despite declarations from politicians and the media that H5N1 is merely a pathogene related to a bird/animal epidemic and has been until now harmless to humans, a wide-scale outbreak of bird flu in Europe and, particularly, in Africa's poultry stocks constitutes a potential disaster for the world. Although it is true that the dreaded crossing of the virus from human to human has so far not occurred, such an outcome must nevertheless be reckoned with and steps taken to develop the most effective means of stopping a pandemic before it starts.

Events in Germany up to now have suggested that the interests of a commercial industry, as well as the political scheming of local authorities, take precedence over an appropriate response to the significant dangers of bird flu.

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