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Bird flu could kill up to 50 million people, claims WHO

TAN EE LYN IN HONG KONG

BIRD flu is far more lethal than the SARS virus that struck Asia last year and could unleash a pandemic that could kill up to 50 million people, the World Health Organisation said yesterday.

A WHO estimate last week that the H5N1 bird flu virus could infect up to 30 per cent of the world's population and kill between two and seven million people was a conservative projection, said Shigeru Omi, the regional director of WHO's Western Pacific office.

"The maximum range is more ... maybe 20 to 50 million people," Mr Omi said in a speech in Hong Kong.

"It will be incomparable to SARS," he said, referring to the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome epidemic that killed 800 people around the world in 2003.

While SARS had a mortality rate of about 15 per cent, the deadly H5N1 strain of bird flu kills up to a third of the people it infects.

H5N1 is now able to latch itself on to more hosts, Mr Omi said.

The virus has killed 32 people in Thailand and Vietnam this year.

Web links

- [Dept of Health - pandemic flu](http://www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/EmergencyPlanning/PandemicFlu/fs/en)
<http://www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/EmergencyPlanning/PandemicFlu/fs/en>
- [WHO - Bird Flu fact sheet](http://www.who.int/csr/don/2004_01_15/en/)
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