



THE SCOTSMAN

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## Bird flu spreads across China's provinces

STEPHANIE HOO IN NANNING

CHINA confirmed new cases of bird flu yesterday in poultry in two central provinces and said it was investigating suspected cases in three other regions - including the province where SARS is believed to have begun.

The official television network China Central Television said cases were confirmed in Hunan and Hubei provinces and that suspected cases - one each - were being investigated in Shanghai and in the provinces of Anhui and Guangdong.

A poultry slaughter and quarantine were under way in those areas, the official Xinhua News Agency said last night.

Outbreaks in China - widely condemned for covering up SARS for several months - were the nightmare health officials had prayed they would not have to face.

Experts fear the world's most populous country could become a huge incubator for the virus if the new cases are confirmed.

People, especially in Guangdong, live cheek by jowl with their chickens and other farm animals, raising the possibility the virus could combine with human flu to produce a strain that could sweep through a world where people have no immunity to it.

The fresh outbreaks prompted Hong Kong, just south of Guangdong, to ban imports of live birds and poultry meat from mainland China, effective immediately.

So far, all eight people - seven of them children - known to have died from bird flu have caught it directly from infected chickens, victims of a virus probably spread by migrating birds.

But the generation of a new flu virus that can pass from person to person is the overwhelming fear, and while the possibility is small, every outbreak shortens the odds of a pandemic a little.

Thailand yesterday reported its first outbreak of bird flu in the southern part of the country. A provincial government official said test results confirmed the outbreak on Thursday in Phang Nga province, 56 miles north-east of the popular tourist resort Phuket. Thousands of chickens were being slaughtered there, he said.

The virus has now spread across more than a third of Thailand, the worst hit of ten Asian countries struck by bird flu.

Thai officials had earlier expressed hope the country might be turning the corner in the war



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against a disease that has seen governments accused of cover-ups and incompetence.

"I'm confident the cull is nearly finished," the agriculture minister, Somsak Thepsuthin, told reporters at Bangkok's Chatuchak market, the world's biggest, where infected fighting cockerels were found this week.

"On Sunday, we should have some good news. We'll rub out areas which have been red areas," he added, referring to zones around outbreaks.

But the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation said mass slaughters, which it says are the most effective way of stamping the virus out and preventing a human flu pandemic, were not happening fast enough.

A senior FAO official, Hans Wagner, said in a statement that although more than 25 million birds had been killed, the organisation was "concerned that mass cullings are not taking place at a speed we consider absolutely necessary to contain the virus H5N1".

Nor were some governments doing enough to convince small farmers, many looking at the destruction of their livelihoods and hiding their stock, of the need to cull. As long as small farmers and commercial producers, especially in poorer countries, do not receive an adequate financial incentive for killing their chickens, they will probably not apply suggested emergency measures," Mr Wagner said.

"There is a real threat that the virus may linger on in poorer countries which are without adequate resources to apply control measures."

The World Health Organisation said it was possible outbreaks were occurring that had not been reported because of weak surveillance.

"If your system is not strong enough to identify that chickens and ducks are dying, then you still have a problem," a WHO representative in China, Hank Bekedam, said yesterday.

The WHO was also concerned that Chinese farmers were culling poultry in an unsafe manner, failing to wear protective gear and goggles.

### 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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