

THE SCOTSMAN

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## China admits human bird flu deaths

BENJAMIN ROBERTSON AND JOE MCDONALD IN BEIJING

CHINA yesterday confirmed its first two human cases of bird flu - at least one fatal - as Asia-Pacific leaders called for closer cooperation to avert a pandemic as the winter flu season arrives.

China was racing to vaccinate billions of chickens, ducks and other farm birds in a massive effort to contain the virus.

The health ministry reported two confirmed cases: in a poultry worker who died in Anhui province in the east, and in a nine-year-old boy in the central province of Hunan who fell ill but recovered, an official news agency said. The boy's 12-year-old sister, who died, was recorded as a suspected case.

China initially said the two children and a schoolteacher who fell ill at the same time were negative for the H5N1 strain. But it reopened the investigation and asked the World Health Organisation for help.

Roy Wadia, a WHO spokesman in Beijing, said China recorded the girl as a bird flu death, but the WHO could not reach a conclusion because her body was cremated and therefore could not be tested.

He said Chinese investigators decided she may have had the virus based on her shared background with her brother and the circumstances of her illness. There was no official word on the status of the teacher.

Experts are especially worried about the potential for bird flu to spread and mutate in China because of its vast poultry flocks and their close contact with people. It also is a major migration route for wildfowl, which might be spreading the virus.

China has reported 11 outbreaks in chickens and ducks over the past month, prompting authorities to destroy millions of birds to contain the virus.

An outbreak on 20 October in Anhui killed 550 birds, but Mr Wadia said the 24-year-old poultry worker who died did not live nearby. He said birds died in her village in what might have been an unreported case.

"She apparently had close contact with sick birds," he said. "She died in a hospital. She was therefore tested adequately."

On Tuesday, the government announced it would vaccinate all of China's 14 billion farm birds.

In Liaoning in the north-east, which has suffered four outbreaks, officials have vaccinated



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all of the province's 320 million farm birds, they said

yesterday.

The communist government has tried to improve its handling of public health threats since it was criticised in 2003 for its slow response to the SARS outbreak.

It has built disease laboratories and a national warning network, while promising to report health threats promptly.

Also yesterday, ministers at the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) summit in Busan, South Korea, urged more information-sharing and response systems to combat bird flu. Condoleezza Rice, the US secretary of state, urged governments to improve communications and to encourage the private sector to help prepare for potential outbreaks.

"New global pandemics, like avian influenza, require new, concerted action," she told APEC trade and foreign ministers.

"We must increase the transparency of our political systems, and we must encourage our private sector to help us prepare for outbreaks before they happen."

In Indonesia, Markos Kyprianou, the EU health commissioner, warned that the country must intensify its bird flu fight.

"It will not be an easy task," said Mr Kyprianou. "Indonesia will need foreign assistance. We can help, but we can't do it for them."

Vietnamese authorities reported bird flu outbreaks in three more areas, bringing to 12 the number of cities and provinces affected.

### 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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