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China denies causing bird flu virus epidemic with cover-up

MARGARET NEIGHBOUR

CHINA yesterday vehemently denied any government cover-up was responsible for the bird flu virus rampaging through Asia.

China's foreign ministry spokeswoman, Zhang Qiyue, said the accusation, made in New Scientist magazine, "is completely inaccurate, is without proof and moreover does not respect science".

The New Scientist quoted experts as saying they suspected the new strain of bird flu began in China, probably in the first half of 2003.

"A combination of official cover-up and questionable farming practices allowed it to turn into the epidemic now under way," the magazine said.

Bird flu has spread to ten countries, from Japan to Pakistan, forcing the destruction of millions of birds and killing at least eight people.

The outbreaks have raised fears the bird flu virus could mix with human influenza and form a deadly disease that could pass directly from person to person. China and other countries are slaughtering domestic fowl by the tens of thousands in the hope of halting the virus.

The World Health Organisation warned yesterday that unsafe culling of poultry in Asia is increasing the risk that the bird flu outbreak could take root in humans. Maria Cheng, a spokeswoman for WHO's infectious diseases unit, said: "What we want to do is cut the possibilities of humans getting infected and you're not doing that if they are not properly protected as they are culling chickens."

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/)
http://www.who.int/csr/don/2004_01_15/en/

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