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## Thai officials accused of bird flu cover-up

MARGARET NEIGHBOUR

THE father of a six-year-old boy who died from bird flu accused the Thai government yesterday of a cover-up, amid fears the outbreak might already have spread to Laos and Myanmar.

Thai officials yesterday admitted that the virus sweeping the country's chicken population killed Captan Boonmanut and could have killed another five people.

Thailand's prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, admitted on Sunday he had suspected "for a couple of weeks" that the disease had appeared in his country, but he kept it quiet for fear of sparking panic. It was only announced on Friday, by which time Captan was already close to death.

The boy's father, Chamnan Boonmanut, yesterday claimed the vital information could have saved his son's life.

"The government knew, so why didn't they tell the public so that we could protect ourselves?" Mr Boonmanut, a farmer, said yesterday. "Nobody wants to get sick and die. They covered it up, and they should have told the people so that we could protect ourselves."

Captan was admitted to a local hospital on 9 January, then transferred to Bangkok's Siriraj Hospital, where he was placed in the intensive care unit on 14 January with high fever. His condition began to deteriorate two days before his death.

"He had severe pneumonia in both lungs. Lab results confirm that it was bird flu," said the head of the hospital's medical sciences department, Dr Suraphol Suwanakul.

"We believe he had direct contact with an infected animal. We learned that his family had raised seven or eight chickens, but all of them died before he became ill."

Officials said yesterday that two other Thai patients are sick with the virus and five are on a watch list. Ten million chickens have so far been destroyed in the country.

With the virus now so widespread, there are fears the potentially deadly strain of bird flu, H5N1, could jump across the border into Myanmar and Laos.

Hans Wagner, a senior official of the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation, said 700 chickens had died on a farm in Vientiane, the Laos capital, and a Thai laboratory was trying to find out why.



"Laos has a very poor public health infrastructure," WHO spokesman Peter Cordingley said in Manila. "If the virus became embedded in Laos, we'd have very serious problems."

Pakistan yesterday reported that two million chickens had died of a mild form of the disease. Taiwan also reported a new outbreak of a mild strain. Both are thought not to be harmful to humans.

Indonesia said at least 400 farms across the vast archipelago suffered outbreaks. But officials said they would only know by the end of the week, when laboratory test results were available, whether it was the less dangerous of two avian flu strains.

South Korea confirmed a fresh case at a chicken farm and planned to slaughter chickens in the area, the agriculture ministry said. South Korea has reported no human cases. Health officials' greatest fear is that the H5N1 virus, which killed Captan and six people in Vietnam could combine with the human influenza virus to create an even deadlier strain.

One expert warned that if culling in affected countries was not carefully monitored, the disease could spread from chickens to pigs.

Dr Prasert Phongcharoen, a World Health Organisation adviser and viral disease expert, added that

the virus would pass more easily from pigs to humans than from chickens, because pigs and people are so genetically close.

"If infected chickens are thrown in rivers the virus could spread to open pig farms and this could result in transmission from pigs to humans," he said.

### **'Nowhere safe' as wild birds blamed for spread**

MIGRATING birds could be responsible for bird flu's rapid spread across Asia, a rate of infection which the World Health Organisation (WHO) calls "historically unprecedented".

"Migratory birds may explain the rapid spread of the virus in the region," said Lo Wing-lok, an infectious disease expert in Hong Kong.

The virus seems to have broken out more or less simultaneously in places thousands of miles apart. "We don't know how this virus is spreading and so it's safe to presume that nowhere can consider itself safe," said Peter Cordingley, a WHO spokesman. "The challenge is growing by the day."

Hong Kong's health minister, Yeoh Eng-kiong, warned residents to keep away from wild birds although the financial hub has been spared an outbreak of the virus so far.

"Wild birds may be infected and their faeces are known to carry the virus, so people have to be careful," Yeoh said.

### **Web links**

- [Dept of Health - pandemic flu](#)

<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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