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Thailand hid suspicions over bird flu

MARGARET NEIGHBOUR

THAILAND confirmed outbreaks of bird flu at two more farms yesterday, as the prime minister admitted his government had suspected for several weeks that the deadly disease had hit its billion-dollar poultry industry, but did not tell the public in order to avoid panic.

Meanwhile, Indonesia yesterday confirmed an outbreak of bird flu among millions of chickens, but said the disease - which has now killed six people in Vietnam - had not spread to humans.

The latest outbreaks come as the World Health Organisation (WHO) said it would be more than six months before an effective vaccination against the flu virus would be available amid concerns the strain might mutate into a form that allows direct human-to-human infection.

Speaking during a visit to Suphanburi, the Thai province where the virus has hit hardest and where scores of now-ruined farmers accuse the government of ignoring their pleas for help, Thailand's prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra said: "We have suspected this [bird flu outbreak] for about a couple of weeks."

The outbreak is potentially the worst crisis to face Mr Thaksin since the telecommunications tycoon came to power in 2001 promising prosperity through economic reform.

A 56-year-old Thai man is suspected of having died from the virus, two boys - aged six and seven - are in hospital as confirmed cases, and two other people are under surveillance. One of the suspected cases - a 58-year-old woman - is now seriously ill and is using a respirator, the health ministry said.

Outbreaks of bird flu were confirmed on two additional poultry farms, bringing the number of farms known to be infected to three, deputy prime minister Newin Chidchob said yesterday.

Hundreds of soldiers and 60 prisoners from the provincial jail were brought in to help with a mass chicken slaughter in Suphanburi to try to halt the spread of the virus.

Mr Thaksin stressed that his government had taken precautions before tests confirmed the presence of bird flu. "Even though we did not have official results ... we acted as if it was bird flu," he said.

More than nine million chickens have been slaughtered in Thailand since November, when reports of the disease first surfaced, the government said.

Officials have warned that Thailand's massive chicken exporting industry, among the top five in



the world, might collapse. Its top markets, Japan and the European Union, have banned Thai chicken products. China also announced yesterday that it was banning Thai and Cambodian poultry.

Thailand exported about 500,000 tons of chicken worth 52 billion baht (\$1.3 billion) in 2003.

The WHO said yesterday it is planning a massive funding appeal to help authorities in Asia cull poultry and to aid farmers whose livelihoods will be wiped out as a result.

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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