

## Avian influenza remains a cause for concern

Health officials in Europe remain alert for possible cases of avian influenza following the disease's arrival in Russia and Central Asia. Warnings from WHO about inadequate pandemic preparedness have heightened fears, despite news that the recent outbreak is under control. Ben Aris reports.

An avian influenza outbreak that swept through Siberia and into Central Asia during the past few weeks looks like it has now been brought under control, but health officials are remaining on the alert as migratory birds could yet spread the disease to western Europe.

Russia began slaughtering a hundred thousand chickens after the first case of the H5N1 avian flu was discovered in Novosibirsk, in Siberia, in July. The same influenza strain swept Southeast Asia in 2003, killing more than 60 people in Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Some 11 000 birds died from the disease before the Russian cull began and roadblocks were thrown up around affected areas. Incidences of avian influenza were found in 35 towns and villages in seven regions, according to the Agricultural ministry, stretching across thousands of kilometres of tundra.

Last Wednesday, Russia's top epidemiologist, Gennady Onishchenko said the spread of the infection was already in retreat. No human infections have been reported since the outbreak began. "Yesterday [Aug 24] we lifted quarantine in seven villages, and today in five more. All poultry farms were

closed there, and all sick birds destroyed", Onishchenko told news agencies.

However, the same day, Kazakhstan's chief veterinary doctor confirmed reports that avian influenza had been found in seven villages close to the Russian border.

"H5N1 was confirmed in all seven settlements where bird deaths have been noted. It is necessary to show maximum vigilance", the chief veterinarian, Asylbek Kozhumuratov, was quoted by the Gazeta.kz news Internet site as saying.

Kazakh authorities immediately imposed a quarantine in the affected Pavlodar region and began a mass cull of birds. One farm worker was hospitalised with suspected infection, but later given a clean bill of health.

More than 140 million chickens were slaughtered in Southeast Asia to contain the previous outbreak at an estimated cost of US\$12 billion, but Russia has got off lightly, bringing the disease under control after culling a little more than 120 000 birds.

The infection hit small commercial farms hardest, which saw their entire stock of chickens slaughtered by health authorities. However, the total culled represents only one tenth of 1% of Russia's total chicken stock.

For once Russia's massive expanse was an advantage: the long distances between cities in the taiga mean transport routes are few and easily checked.

Despite its poor reputation, Russia boasts a centralised and efficient veterinary service, one of the few things the Soviets did well. By the end of last week Onishchenko said meat from poultry plants in the infected regions was safe to eat.

As Russians are picky about their food (if not their diet) and have a strong bias

for "natural" food, Russian farms tend to have higher hygiene standards than legally required, say agricultural experts.

Domestic demand for chicken was relatively unaffected, partly because chicken remains the cheapest meat on the market. With 17.8% of Russia's 142 million-strong population living on or below the poverty line many cannot afford alternative meat. Poverty is especially high in rural areas in the Asian part of Russia where the outbreak was located.

As the danger subsidies western European countries are playing safe. 2 weeks ago, Dutch authorities ordered its poultry farmers to keep birds indoors in case migratory birds from Russian brought the disease with them.

The German government also dispatched a team to Russia to monitor the situation and to prepare a plan in case the disease crossed into Germany.

A European rapid alert system was developed after the Asian outbreak and authorities are standing by to roll out a mass cull of western European birds if necessary. The EU banned the import of live birds from Russian and Kazakhstan on August 12.

However, the EU executive commission downplayed the dangers of avian flu arriving in western Europe this week and said there was no evidence the disease had even reached the European part of Russia, bounded by the Ural mountains.

Nevertheless the EU is putting plans to stockpile antiviral medications into place. WHO warned last week that existing global stocks of drugs are not sufficient and manufacturing capacity could not be increased fast enough to counter a pandemic should the disease spread rapidly in western Europe.

Ben Aris



Russian road blocks around affected areas have helped contain avian influenza