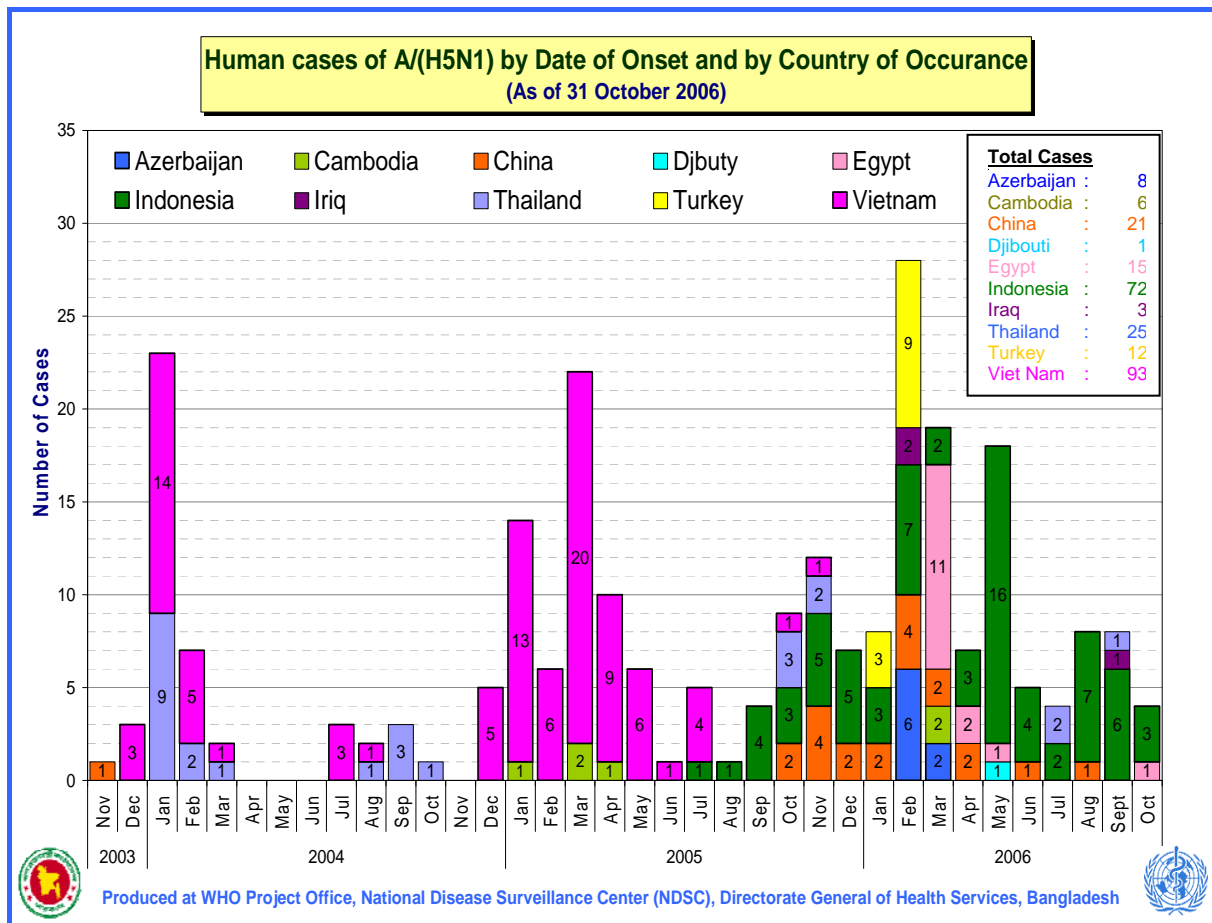




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Epidemics Curve of A/(H5N1) till date

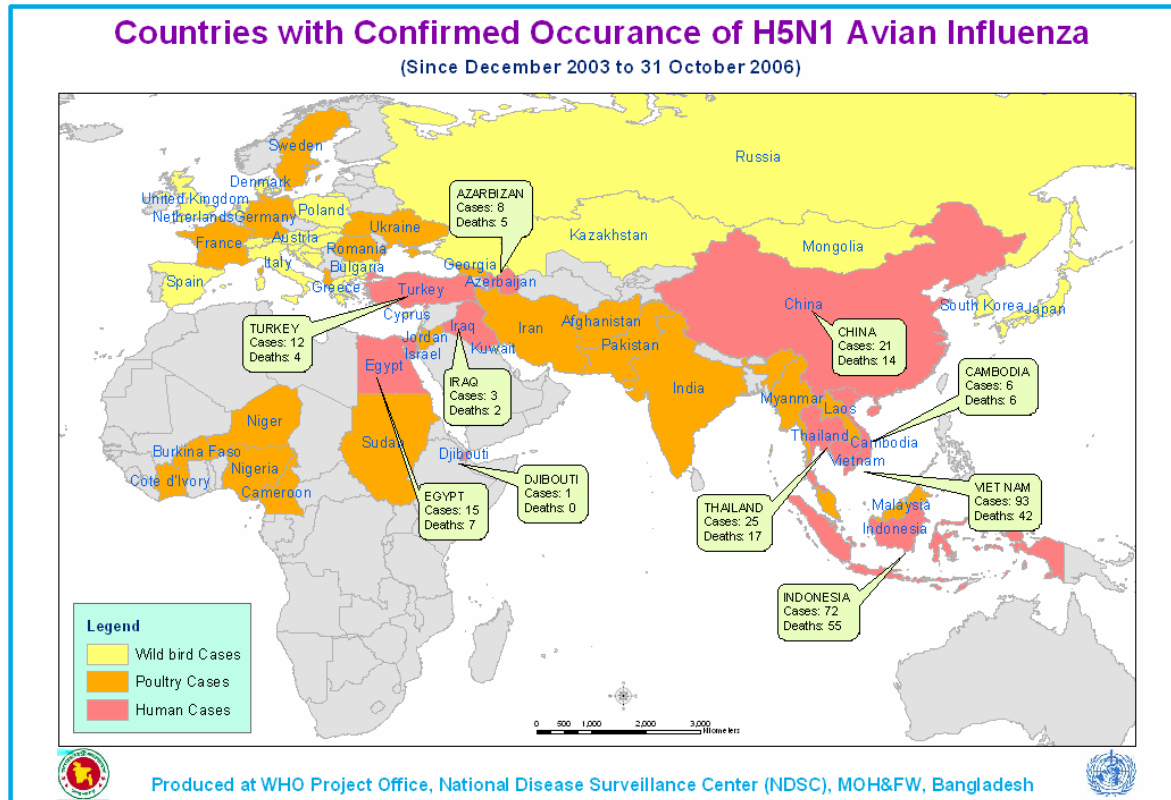


Data source: World Health Organization

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Distribution of H5N1 Cases around the Globe



Data source: World Health Organization

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Experts refute emerging of new strain of bird flu in S. China

November 06, 2006

China Daily, the only English Language national newspaper in the country, is to publish a report about Chinese experts who have denied the emerging of a new strain of bird flu in some part of the country.

The full text of the report is as follows:

The nation's leading bird flu experts Saturday refuted a report that a new strain of bird flu had emerged in southern China, published by a foreign publication and widely cited by foreign media recently.

Scientists in Hong Kong and the United States said in a report released last week that a new strain of bird flu called the "Fujian-like virus", first isolated in the southern Chinese province of Fujian last year, had become prevalent in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Laos, Malaysia, and Thailand.

Chen Hualan, director of the National Bird Flu Reference Laboratory at the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences, rebuked the report, published in the US-based Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences saying its claims "lack scientific proof".



"The so-called 'Fujian-like virus' is not a new variant of the virus," she said, "Gene sequence analysis of the virus shows that it shares high conformity with the H5N1 virus that was isolated in Hunan when bird flu broke out in early 2004."

Samples from every domestic bird flu outbreak are sent for isolation and gene sequence analysis at Chen's lab.

Chen said that in 2005 and 2006, the lab had isolated some viruses in waterfowl in southern China which was reported to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE).

"These viruses all remain steady in gene type and there is no marked change in their biological characteristics," she said.

Chen said there was only one new variant of the virus, which was isolated to north China's Shanxi Province and the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region at the beginning of this year and has been reported to the FAO and OIE.

Experimental results show that the variant is weak in triggering disease in mammals and a new vaccine, which has been put into use in these areas, has effectively brought it under control.

Chen also defended the effectiveness of China's bird flu vaccine, saying that it had a good effect, in response to the report's surmise that the current vaccine was less effective for the "Fujian-like virus".

The report claimed that through the analysis of serum samples from 76 chickens for signs of antibodies against three H5N1 variants, including the Fujian-like strain, they found almost all of the samples displayed two to four times more antibodies to the other two variants than to the Fujian virus, suggesting that the vaccine given to the chickens was less effective against that strain.

Chen said that the evaluation of the vaccine was "not scientific" as where the chickens were from and whether they had been vaccinated was unknown.

Chen said that since the country launched a strategy of culling and vaccination to curb bird flu in the later half of 2005, the number of bird flu cases has plummeted.

Statistics from the Ministry of Agriculture showed that more than 95 percent of domestic poultry had been vaccinated from January to October. Ten cases of bird flu broke out in poultry populations from January to October this year, there were 50 cases in 2004 and 31 last year.

Shu Yuelong, director of the National Influenza Centre at the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, also refuted the report's allegation that five people in southern China were actually infected by the new "Fujian-like virus".

Shu said that altogether 16 variants of bird flu viruses have been found in the 20 confirmed cases of human infections in the Chinese mainland since October 2005, seven in 2005 and 13 in 2006.

"Fifteen out of the 16 variants were isolated from cases in southern China and they belong to the same gene type," Shu said, "There is no proof that five of them were infected by a new mutated virus."

Shu said that the viruses isolated in South China and northern China were very different and also differed a lot with the virus isolated in Vietnam and Thailand.

Chen Hualan also attacked the report's allegations that the "Fujian-like virus" was causing a third wave of prevalence of bird flu in Southeast Asia.

"Judging from the actual situation, these allegations are all subjective and arbitrary surmises," she said.



-Source: China Daily

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Human Strain Of Bird Flu Virus, Just A Matter Of Time?

07 Nov 2006

Scientists are increasingly certain that the bird flu virus H5N1 will at some point in the future mutate and pass on to humans , the only uncertainty being "when?" This would be a truly horrifying thing to happen and could create a scenario like a science fiction film.

The WHO figures are 252 cases where humans got infected through birds, and 148 deaths. If the virus does mutate and spread the infection among humans , a worldwide outbreak could take place within a few weeks . This is attributed to the weak resistance to the virus in the human immune system.

It is not only the elderly and weakest members of society who could die from influenza. Even people in the prime of life - the 20 to 40 age range could be struck by the infection.

An imaginary account of what could happen will be screened on BBC Two's Horizon program , describing the devastation such an outbreak would wreak on the human race. The program visualises the scenes at overcrowded hospitals, empty schools and offices , and public transport in shambles.

The British government's Influenza Pandemic Contingency Plan predicts that upto 750,000 people could die in the UK, while the US says 2 million could die. In fact the US govt. is asking its citizens to prepare themselves for the worst by stocking up on medicines.

The main line of defence seems to be a vaccine. But if a virus does materialise, getting a vaccine ready will take several months. The vaccine available at present is not produced in large enough quantities, in fact only 9% of the world's population can be vaccinated with a six month supply produced

-Source: MedIndia - India

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WHO tells bird flu scientists to stop squabbling

Wed Nov 8, 2006

HONG KONG (Reuters) - The World Health Organisation has urged Chinese and foreign scientists to stop squabbling and share information to figure out how to combat a new H5N1 bird flu virus strain that is spreading unchecked in poultry flocks.

Henk Bekedam, WHO's representative for China, said that instead of battling it out in the media, scientists from the Chinese government, Hong Kong and elsewhere should sit down and study the details.

"This is an ideal opportunity to get a better idea what is happening in China and assess strategies that have been effective and develop even more targeted strategies if there is a need," he said.

Chinese officials and scientists rejected a paper published last week by Hong Kong and U.S. scientists in the U.S. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS) which said a new vaccine-resistant "Fujian-like" H5N1 strain had emerged in poultry in China and may spread across Asia and Europe.



In an interview with Chinese media published on Tuesday, two Chinese scientists fired strongly worded rebuttals, saying there was "no scientific basis" for the views and conclusions in the paper.

They accused the foreign researchers of "unscientific methods" and said China's vaccination programme was effective.

But they gave no details or data, something that Bekedam says is badly wanting.

"Right or wrong, this goes to a level of details that you have to talk to scientists, people who look at gene sequencing and give us clues as to what is happening," he told Reuters.

"If viruses are substantially different, then it is very important for us to make some re-adjustment in the diagnostics, to consider if we might need to come up with a new vaccine."

NO SURPRISE

H5N1 remains a disease in birds although it has killed over 150 people since late 2003. However, experts fear it could start a pandemic and kill millions if it ever mutates to transmit efficiently among people. Research so far into the Fujian strain shows it poses no heightened danger to people.

The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) issued a statement saying the U.S. report "does not come as a surprise" in showing that H5N1 is changing, and called for continued vigilance.

"(FAO and OIE) warn that with new antigens developing continually in avian influenza viruses, vaccines currently in use for poultry need to be assessed regularly," they said.

The two bodies urged scientists to share any findings about changes to the virus.

"FAO, the OIE and a myriad of scientific experts on avian influenza have repeatedly called upon scientists around the world to share their findings and virus strains in a timely and transparent fashion," they said.

China's Ministry of Agriculture and two scientists will hold a news conference on Friday in Beijing to discuss the PNAS paper.

China's position in the saga so far has been inconsistent, and contradictory statements made by senior Chinese government officials have led to confusion.

Its health ministry previously shared H5N1 samples isolated from six victims with WHO, and gene sequencing showed they were infected with the Fujian strain in 2005 and 2006.

But after the paper was published, China's foreign ministry said the country had found no evidence of the Fujian strain. One of the Chinese scientists also rejected that the strain was responsible for recent human infections in China.

-Source: Reuters India - Mumbai, India - By Tan Ee Lyn

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