

The containing of a bird flu outbreak in western India raised more questions than it answered

TOM SULLIVAN IN NEW DELHI

INDIAN health authorities breathed a sigh of relief earlier this week when tests for the deadly H5N1 bird flu virus in humans proved negative.

In the western state of Maharashtra medical teams culled more than 90,000 birds and carried out door-to-door checks on 100,000 people in a mopping-up operation that health experts say was swift and well-handled — once it got underway.

Now that the initial emergency has passed, a number of questions are being raised, such as: Why were birds dying for more than a month before anything was done? And how did the virus appear in the west of the country but bypass other regions on the flight path of migratory birds?

Perhaps the biggest question though, is how a country with a population of 1.2 billion people and twice as many chickens — which mostly roam free in backyards and are sold in cramped, unhygienic wet markets — has still not registered a single case of human bird flu.

"We really don't know why but it's not unreasonable to presume there will be human cases in the future with increased outbreaks," said India's World Health Organization (WHO) country chief, Dr S J Habayeb.

More than a hundred deaths have occurred in human cases

CONFUSED CULL

of bird flu worldwide, mainly in Asia.

DATA DEPRIVATION

In an interview with TODAY, Dr Habayeb said that the speed of the response in Maharashtra, which has one of India's "best performing" health departments, played an important role in preventing human infections.

However he was less confident that other Indian states would have the capacity to cope with future outbreaks.

Some health policy analysts have criticised the government's failure to provide reliable scientific information about bird flu to the public and to the scientific community in India.

"Medical teams in Maharashtra found children with grade two and three malnutrition, but not a single case of the virus," said Dr Anita Kar, a health science lecturer at Pune University.

"Don't you think that, if you have people with those kinds of immune systems, someone would have contracted the virus?"

THE SO-CALLED PLAGUE

Dr Kar drew parallels with the outbreak of a plague-like disease in Gujarat in 1994, which saw a chaotic exodus from the city of Surat and widespread confusion over whether plague had indeed broken out.

"(Now, as then) the government has not shared information on the diagnosis," she said.

Dr Kar added that the scientific community should have access to any data relating to bird flu, unlike what happened in Gujarat, where "in the so-called plague out-

break, we did not have a confirmed bacteriological case".

According to Dr Kar, until the government releases detailed lab reports, it is impossible to be sure whether the bird flu reported so far is not actually Ranikhet disease — another flu-like infection in poultry which does not transmit to humans.

"There is endemic flu in poultry here, particularly at this time of the year when the season is changing," she said.

Recently the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu announced that 16,000 chickens had died of Ranikhet disease.

CHICKEN TONIGHT?

Not surprisingly Dr Kar's suggestion is also a theory promoted by defenders of the poultry industry, which has been hit hard by a collapse in sales of chickens and eggs across India. Critics have blamed the industry for covering up the initial signs that something was wrong when hundreds of chickens started dying. It took local media reports to raise the alarm.

Despite an advertising campaign which has included appeals from Bollywood celebrities and government ministers, as well as poultry festivals (which offered free chickens and eggs to hungry crowds of poor people), consumer confidence has been badly hit. Some producers reported sales slashed by up to 90 per cent. Indian railway companies, airlines and the armed forces all took poultry products off their menus.

"For consumer trust to revive," said Mr Amit Sachdeva, a poultry industry consultant, "the govern-

ment will need to create a food safety net, a 'Seal of Quality' which would be part and parcel of the marketing of chicken and eggs."

WHO WILL DIE?

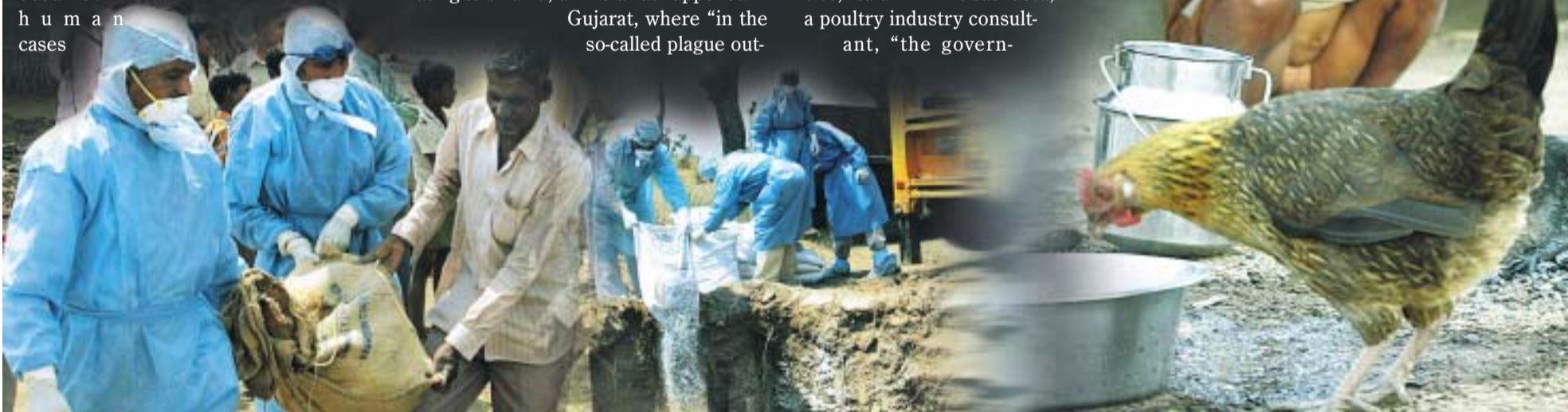
Preventing further outbreaks of the flu among chickens may take a while as India's only laboratory for testing the bird flu virus is swamped with poultry samples. It will take some time to test samples from migratory birds, thought to be the carriers of the disease.

In the meantime the main worry in India, as elsewhere, is that the H5N1 virus will mutate so that it can be passed from human to human. That is the worst case scenario for the WHO, which predicts that large numbers could be infected in India's congested cities and slums.

"The H5N1 has a mortality rate of 50 per cent. Our fear is that if it mutates it could become more virulent," said Dr Habayeb.

"In a country of one billion people even a mortality rate of 1 per cent would mean huge numbers of people."

The writer is a freelance journalist based in India.



PHOTOS: AFP, ARTWORK: ENG KONG

GLOBAL ROUNDUP

ENVOY'S MYANMAR TRIP CUT SHORT

Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar, acting as an envoy for the Association of South-east Asian Nations (Asean), has cut short a trip to Myanmar aimed at pressing the junta over human rights reforms.

Mr Syed Hamid will leave Myanmar on Friday night, ending his long-delayed visit to the country a day early. He met the country's officials but not detained democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi. — AFP

KING MEETS ADVISERS OVER THAKSIN

Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej held a rare meeting late on Thursday with the Privy Council, a body of royal advisers. It presented the king with appeals to replace

embattled Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, a council source said.

If the king was to appoint a prime minister, that person would act as a caretaker until new elections can be held. — AFP

ANWAR DENIES SEDITION ACCUSATION

Malaysia's former Deputy Premier Anwar Ibrahim has denied accusations that he made seditious comments during an election campaign last year. Mr Anwar, who was sacked and jailed in 1998 on corruption and sodomy charges, was interviewed by police over accusations that he made a seditious speech at a political rally in the Kelantan last November.

An unidentified person had lodged a police report against him. — AFP

Indonesia recalls ambassador to Australia

JAKARTA — Indonesia recalled its ambassador to Australia on Friday amid a furore over Canberra's decision to grant temporary visas to 42 asylum seekers from its restive Papua province.

Indonesian foreign ministry spokesman Yuri Thamrin said its envoy would be called back to Jakarta for "consultations" with foreign ministry officials over the matter.

"It is not a permanent recall, but it is important because there are issues that need to be discussed over this incident," Mr Thamrin told reporters.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayuda told reporters that the recall would take place "as soon as there's a flight that can take our ambassador home", the

Detikcom online news agency reported.

Australia said this week it had granted visas to all but one of the 43 Papuans who arrived in the north of the country by boat in January.

The Papuans, who include pro-independence activists and their families, have accused Jakarta of "genocide" in troubled Papua, a former Dutch colony occupied by Indonesia in the 1960s.

Indonesia released a statement late on Thursday that said none of the Papuans were subject to any persecution. It added: "Indeed, the Indonesian government guaranteed their safety if they wish to return back to Indonesia. The decision (to grant the visas) ... is therefore baseless." — AFP