

**From:** Merritt Clifton <anmlpepl@whidbey.com>

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**To:** waragon1@verizon.net

**Subject:** Cockfighters spread Asian killer bird flu

From ANIMAL PEOPLE, March 2004:

BANGKOK, BEIJING--Cockfighters, cock breeders, and public officials kow-towing to them tried to pass the blame for spreading the deadly H5N1 avian flu virus throughout Southeast Asia to pigeons, sparrows, and even open-billed storks.

Bad vaccines took some of the rap, too.

An attempt was even made, as the death toll increased on factory farms, to attribute the epidemic to free range poultry producers.

But as the H5N1 "red zones" expanded in at least eight nations, the evidence pointed ever more directly at commerce in gamecocks--and at the efforts of cockfighters and cock breeders to protect their birds from the culls and disease outbreaks that had already killed more than 100 million chickens who were raised to lay eggs and be eaten, as well as 22 people, most of them children.

The pattern of the H5N1 outbreak paralleled the spread of exotic Newcastle disease through southern California and into Arizona between November 2002 and May 2003. Approximately 3.7 million laying hens were killed to contain the Newcastle epidemic, but USDA investigators believe it began among backyard fighting bird flocks, advancing as gamecocks were transported between fights. It apparently invaded commercial layer flocks through contaminated clothing worn by workers who participated in cockfighting.

Almost all of the early speculation about the source of H5N1 outbreaks pointed toward wild birds, even though the disease appeared to spread most rapidly long after the fall migrations were over and before the spring migrations started.

"Migratory birds carry the disease," WHO spokesperson Bob Dietz unequivocally told Keith Bradsher of The New York Times on January 26.

"The path of the disease appears to follow the north/south winter migration pattern of birds such as swallows, plovers, terns, and egrets, from as far north as Siberia to Australia in the south," added South China Morning Post correspondent Cheung Chi-Fai on January 27--disregarding that H5N1 is not yet known to have reached Australia.

"You have birds from all over the world coming to Asia. They stop for a rest, and they come into contact with other birds and other animals and

pass on their viruses," explained Chinese University microbiology professor John Tam Siu-lun.

But Mai Po Nature Reserve conservation manager Lew Young discounted the speculation. "If wintering birds are responsible for the spread [of H5N1], we should have seen it happen already, as they have been arriving since September last year," Young told Cheung Chi-Fai.

## Bad vaccines

New Scientist correspondent Debora MacKenzie was another early skeptic. "The currently circulating H5N1, like the related one that caused an outbreak in Penfold Park, Hong Kong, in 2003, is unique in that it kills ducks as well as a variety of other birds," wrote MacKenzie. "This might make it less likely that wild birds are mainly responsible for carrying the virus over long distances."

But MacKenzie in the February 11 edition of New Scientist focused on failed agricultural vaccinations.

"Earl Brown, a flu virologist at the University of Ottawa in Canada, compared the genetic sequence of the virus isolated from a Vietnamese person who died of bird flu in January 2004 to other gene sequences," MacKenzie reported,

"Five of the eight [DNA] strands were 96% to 99% identical to an H5N1 flu virus found in duck meat smuggled from eastern China and intercepted in Taiwan in 2003. The remaining three were 98% the same as sequences obtained from a goose in Hong Kong in 2000.

"Geese and ducks in Hong Kong are imported from large, intensive poultry producers in Guangdong, China," MacKenzie reminded. This is where H5N1 is believed to have originated each time it has appeared.

Brown's findings strengthened earlier reports from scientists at the National Institute of Animal Health in Japan, who found a close relationship among the Viet-nameese H5N1 virus, a version found in a Guangdong goose in 1996, and a version that in 2003 killed a Hong Kong man who had recently visited Guangdong.

Flu virologist Richard Webby, of St Jude's Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee, told MacKenzie that, "We have a bucket of evolution going on? H5 is circulating fairly widely somewhere, under some kind of unusual selective pressure."

"The explosion in variation," MacKenzie wrote, "coincides with the period during which Chinese farmers have practiced widespread vaccination of chickens against flu. In 2003, scientists who developed an improved flu vaccine for poultry, including Robert Webster of St Jude's, concluded that

such vaccination "may be a serious problem for human pandemic preparedness," because the vaccines "might mask disease signs while allowing the birds to continue to shed virus."

Therefore, Webster et al suggested in the journal *Virology*, "persistence of virus infection in the presence of a flock immunity may contribute to increased virus evolution."

The failed vaccination theory was reinforced a week later when the *Shanghai Daily* reported that 23-year-old college graduate Li Zhongcheng and his wife, of central Henan province, had been arrested for selling 944 bottles of homebrewed avian flu-related vaccines, of dubious quality, since 2001.

They were almost certainly not the only people with similar businesses. Hundreds may have done the same thing, throughout Southeast Asia, where regulation of the pharmaceutical industry is notoriously lax.

Bad vaccines produced for years in relatively trivial amounts by scattered individuals could explain why so many chickens appeared to be so suddenly vulnerable, but could not fully explain why so many fell ill in so many places and so short a time.

South China Morning Post Guangzhou correspondent Leu Siew Ying on January 31 asserted, without quoting any experts, that free range poultry farms "could well be the weak link in Guangdong's defense against bird flu." Allowing chickens to range freely, Leu Siew Ying argued, means "they are exposed to migratory birds and cross-infection from diseased birds on nearby farms. Quarantine measures look impressive on paper and are being implemented at large farms," Leu Siew Ying wrote, "but there is little such security at smaller farms."

Leu Siew Ying continued that biosecurity was further jeopardized when small-scale poultry farmers sold manure as fertilizer, ignoring that manure from large-scale Southeast Asia poultry farms is distributed as fertilizer and pig and cattle feed in vastly greater volume, with correspondingly greater likelihood of becoming a disease vector.

"I am disgusted by academia, industry and government trying to blame wildlife for problems caused by intensive agriculture," responded Farmed Animal Watch electronic news digest editor Mary Finelli in an e-mail to ANIMAL PEOPLE.

"Farmed animals are bred for production traits at the expense of their immune systems," Finelli continued, "and then are put into prime disease generating conditions. To blame H5N1 on wild birds [and free-range chickens] when megatons of manure from factory farms is being spread all over cropland is a classic case of blaming the victims."

## Crows & pigeons

As suspicion of wild birds intensified, and H5N1 appeared at a duck farm about 30 miles away, Shanghai barred bird-watchers from three local nature reserves.

Singapore environment ministry spokesperson Satish Appoo told Emma Ross of Associated Press on January 29 that his department would escalate efforts to kill non-native Indian house crows, claiming to have already reduced the crow population "from 120,000 in 2001 to about 30,000."

Thai permanent secretary for natural resources and the environment Plodprasop Suraswadi told the Thai News Agency that while the risk of contracting avian flu from wild birds was low, citizens should refrain from feeding wild birds, including sparrows and pigeons.

On January 30 deputy Bangkok governor Prapan Kitisin, whose administration tried unsuccessfully in 2003 to rid the central city of dogs, followed Singapore in announcing a mass pigeon cull. Kitisan also ordered that guano be washed off the awnings covering outdoor food vendors' stalls and vehicles.

Not so much as one speck of bird dirt actually associated pigeons with H5N1, but the panic turned in their direction anyway.

On February 4, the China State General Administration of Sport suspended all training, races, exchanges, and sales of homing pigeons between China, Thailand, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Taiwan. The Beijing Homing Pigeon Association ordered more frequent disinfection and immediate clearance of excrement and feathers. The Shanghai Racing Pigeon Association grounded all 400,000 local homing pigeons. The Beijing association grounded more than a million.

February would usually be the peak pigeon training time, in preparation for the pigeon racing season, which begins in March.

More than 23,000 households in Beijing and 8,000 in Shanghai keep racing pigeons. Nationally, the China Association of Carrier Pigeons claims 300,000 members.

"An official surnamed Yang with the bird flu control team under the Agriculture Ministry said researchers had yet to develop a vaccine for pigeons, which should be different from those used for consumer poultry at least in dosage," the Xinhua News Agency said.

"Yang said Beijing had reported no pigeon infections and there was no

scientific proof to support the possibility of virus transmission from pigeons to humans. However, many advocate the eradication of pigeons because of the large amounts of excrement they produce," the Xinhua News Agency acknowledged.

In other words, pigeon-haters seized their opportunity, irrespective of the evidence.

In Thailand, where the pigeon-blaming began, pigeons were officially exonerated on February 17. "None of the pigeons that fly over Bangkok's skies have been found to be infected with bird flu," natural resources and environment minister Prapat Panyachatraksa told The Nation.

### Storks & cranes

Storks and cranes, on the other hand, were demonstrably afflicted. They were also falling dead. But while they could potentially carry H5N1, experts observed, there was no reason to believe that they already had. H5N1 "is a major threat to a number of endangered bird species and I fear it could get a lot worse," acknowledged ornithologist Chris Cook to South China Morning Post Tokyo correspondent Julian Ryall. "Right now, 80% of East Asia's white-necked cranes are wintering in Japan," Cook added. "It's just a matter of weeks before the spring migrations start, and there's no way anyone can stop these birds from flying from one country to the next."

"Test results showed three migratory Asian open-billed storks that died in Nakhon Sawan had H5N1," wrote Ranjana Wangvipula of the Bangkok Post on February 14, "but authorities said it was unlikely they had carried this virulent strain from abroad.

"Hundreds of open-billed storks have died at Bung Boraphet swamp in Nakhon Sawan and Bangkok's Lat Krabang district," Ranjana continued, "where poultry infected with bird flu were found. An official said the mass death of storks had prompted the agriculture ministry to demand that up to 20,000 migratory open-billed storks be killed."

Nakhon Sawan forestry management chief Vorawit Chue-suwan told Supamart Kasem of the Bangkok Post that killing the remaining storks would be the only option if the carcasses proved to be carrying H5N1, but warned that the job would be difficult, as the storks would resist capture.

"A study is needed to find if the storks caught the disease from chickens," Thai natural resources and environment minister Praphat Panyachatrak said.

Praphat refused to order that wild storks be culled, Ranjana said, "without sound scientific proof that the storks were carriers of the disease."

Praphat pointed out that the open-billed storks in Thailand migrate from Bangladesh, where avian flu outbreaks have occurred, but not involving H5N1 so far.

"We'd better tell Bangladesh to keep a close watch on the birds on their return," Praphat added. The storks normally return to Bangladesh in May.

### Caged songbirds

Recalling the Chinese bird purges of the Mao tse Tung era, when sparrows were wrongly blamed for nine years of famine, Wildlife Conservation Society vice president of wildlife health Robert Cook on February 3 warned that, "In almost all cases, eradication schemes are not cost-efficient or effective means to reduce disease spread, compared to health education, sanitation, and controlling animal movement."

Cook, WCS field veterinary program director William Karesh, and WCS director of hunting and wildlife trade issues Elizabeth Bennett recommended that wild bird markets should be permanently closed throughout Asia, and that airlines should refuse to carry "large numbers of animals over large distances for commercial markets. The European Union has already banned the import of pet birds from Asian countries where avian flu has been detected," the WCS experts said.

"The wild bird trade in Asia is conducted on an extremely large scale, and is highly fluid," explained Bennett. "The one common theme is that wild birds are caught, sold and transported in very large numbers, and that effective controls, both in terms of laws and enforcement of those laws, are currently weak across much of Asia."

Added Karesh, "The birds are caged in stressful, unnatural and often unhygienic conditions during transport and in the markets, where they stand beak to beak with both wild and domestic birds, and are handled by humans—all providing the ideal conditions for transmission of disease."

The WCS team noted that according to recent field investigations, "In Bangkok's weekend market, on 25 weekends in one year alone, 70,000 birds representing 276 species from Asia, Australia, Africa and South America were sold. In a single market in Java, Indonesia, between half a million and 1.5 million wild birds are sold each year."

Philippine provincial officials began warning the public to avoid contact with migratory storks from China circa February 1.

When a crackdown on caged bird trafficking came, of sorts, it consisted of a February 9 announcement by Manila airport animal quarantine office chief Davinio Catbagan that 353 lovebirds imported from the

Netherlands by way of Thailand on a Kuwait Airways flight had been gassed and burned.

Imported without proper permits, the lovebirds never left the aircraft, but could have become infected when the doors were opened in Thailand, Catbagan said.

Wild bird trafficking elsewhere in Southeast Asia drew almost no notice.

But Kasetsart University veterinary teaching hospital faculty member Kaset Sutasha reinforced the Wildlife Conservation society warning.

"The outbreak could be caused by the smuggling of birds from places such as China and other countries bordering Thailand," Kaset told The Nation, adding that "The movement of fighting cocks, both in and out of the country, might also be a cause.

"We have found a large number of migratory birds who were poisoned or shot by people who were frightened of the spread of bird flu," Kaset continued, but none of the dead birds that Kaset examined had H5N1.

Added Wildlife Conservation Society training and education coordinator Petch Manopawitr, "Normally migratory birds frequent wetlands, where you wouldn't site a poultry farm."

## Sparrows

On February 12 Guangxi "senior animal infection official" Bi Qiang and duck farmer Huang Shengde predictably suggested that sparrows, the all-purpose Chinese avian villains, might have infected the ducks near Dingdang who were the first birds in China officially identified as ill with H5N1.

"This is the first time a Chinese official has pointed to a possible reason for Dingdang's infection," wrote Jason Leow of the Straits Times China bureau.

But Agence France Press revealed the same day that, "A Vietnamese dealer of fighting cocks has tested positive for bird flu."

Truong Trong Hoang, deputy director of health information and education in Ho Chi Minh City, said that the 22-year-old man was admitted to the city Hospital for Tropical Disease on February 6. He later died.

Grudgingly, officials throughout Southeast Asia began to recognize that gamecocks were perhaps the most important of all vectors in transmitting H5N1 not only from place to place but also--since gamecocks often are kept in houses with humans, to safeguard them against theft and tampering-- from birds to people.

## Finally gamecocks

While pigeons were purged despite the absence of any evidence that they carried either H5N1 or any other avian flu, gamecocks were not totally ignored. Technically, all poultry were included from the beginning in the Thai effort to purge H5N1.

Yet even as other birds were killed by the thousands, Bangkok cock breeders were unofficially allowed a grace period of several days to get their birds out of the city or at least out of sight.

Thai agriculture minister Somsak Thepsuthin claimed that his department had no authority to kill gamecocks.

"Only if the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry agrees to the culling of birds can we kill them," Somsak said.

"My ministry can deal only with birds who are not infected," environment minister Prapat Panyachatraksa responded.

After days of buck-passing, and after receiving direct orders from prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra to kill all chickens within three miles of Bangkok epidemic areas, Somsak personally led several seizures of fighting cocks on January 30.

"We will not let them do this. There is no proof these cocks have bird flu. We are going to eat them. That is better than letting them be suffocated," cock breeder Surat Boonchea, 64, told Straits Times Thailand correspondent Nirmal Ghosh.

Other gamecock breeders reportedly did eat about 10 of their birds in public protest.

But at Surat Boonchea's facility all that happened, Ghosh wrote, was that "A Buddhist monk placed incense sticks in the cane baskets and gave a last blessing to the more than two dozen fighting cocks" who were taken from Surat to be killed. Seventy-seven gamecocks in all were seized that day and hurled into an incinerator.

Somsak told Jintana Panyaavudh of The Nation that he felt pain at having to kill his own favorite pet fighting cock, to set a personal example of obedience to the law.

"In my life I have never killed any animals," said deputy prime minister Somkid Jatusripitak, after killing his son's pet bantams. "I felt very terrible and kept thinking that I should not have raised the bantams. However, I told myself that the chickens had to be culled to save people's lives."

Around Phitsanulok, an epi-center of H5N1 outbreaks 600 miles north of Bangkok, nearly 4,000 cock breeding families resisted compliance with cull orders.

"Apparently in favor of local people, livestock officials in Phitanulok have not asked police to set up a checkpoint to prevent cocks from being smuggled out. The officials have not contacted the army to ask soldiers to



catch the cocks," the Bangkok Post reported.

Amid the governmental deference to cock breeders, almost no one other than Thai Animal Guardians Association chair Roger Lohanon ever mentioned in print that most cockfighting is technically illegal in Thailand, under a 1982 Interior Ministry regulation adopted to endorse the 1935 Gambling Act. The 1982 regulation limited cockfighting to about 70 then established pits in Chonburi, Nonthaburi, and parts of the Thai northeast.

The H5N1 pandemic should have slammed the brakes on efforts led by parliamentary committee for agriculture leader Kamsung Propakornkaewrat to repeal the 1982 regulation. Yet even as the virus spread in late November, Kamsung led a seminar on expanding cockfighting, and told Lohanon to shut up when Lohanon appeared, uninvited, to address the hostile audience.

Cockfighting and transportation of gamecocks were at last suspended nationwide in Thailand on February 3.

Yukol Limlaemthong, director-general of the Thailand Livestock Development Department, on February 10 told Saowalak Pumyaem of The Nation that all fighting cocks would soon have to be registered and certified, and would have to be raised in confinement.

"Controlling the epidemic in the capital is now beyond the ministry's competence due to strong opposition from owners of fighting cocks, who keep hiding their birds away from livestock officials," deputy agriculture minister Newin Chidchob told Kultida Samabuddhi of the Bangkok Post.

On February 17, The Nation reported, Chidchob exasperatedly ordered his staff to cull all fowl within 14 newly declared "red zone" epidemic areas within three days, or else. Chidchob said that fighting cocks were the H5N1 carriers in 13 of the 14 areas.

One of the new "red zone" areas was in Roi Et province, previously unaffected. "We've found that one fighting cock contracted the disease and later learned that its owner in fact smuggled it out of a controlled area to avoid culling," Chidchob told Uamdao Noikorn of Associated Press.

## Cockers fight cops

Indonesia, which may have even more illegal cockfighting than Thailand, had already attempted a crackdown of sorts even before acknowledging that a seven-month losing battle against a "Newcastle" outbreak was in truth an attempt to stop H5N1.

Official reluctance to cull chickens in Indonesia after the H5N1 epidemic was recognized was widely attributed to the influence of major poultry producers, but major producers in other nations were among the first to start culling, in hopes of halting avian flu before the flu halted commerce in

chicken meat and eggs.

Of perhaps greater concern to Indonesian authorities, especially on Bali, the hardest-hit island, was rioting that erupted on January 23 in Denpasar, after Commander Agus Sugianto led a police raid on a cockfight at the Dalem Temple.

Cockfighting persists on Bali, Papua, Maluku, and some other islands in the thin disguise of being a Hindu ritual called Tabuh Rah.

Cockfighters and spectators told Jakarta Post correspondent Wahyu Boediwardhana that, "Without prior warning, the police fired three shots before storming into the hall, screaming loudly while beating and kicking everybody," allegedly seizing the gamblers' money and cellular telephones.

After one cockfighting enthusiast "managed to scale the temple tower and sound the alarm," Boediwardhana wrote, "hundreds of villagers surrounded the temple and started throwing stones at the police," who "hurriedly left with at least 28 confiscated cocks."

Four truckloads of cockfighters drove to the Denpasar police station to confront Senior Commander Komang Udayana. Udayana admitted ordering the raid and claimed the confiscations of money and telephones were to preserve evidence of betting.

Leading a province and a nation often torn by ethnic and regional strife, the governments of Bali and Indonesia undoubtedly weighed the body count that might result from uncontrolled H5N1 against the casualties of rioting and even insurrection, before opting for discretion over valor. --M.C.

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Merritt Clifton  
Editor, ANIMAL PEOPLE  
P.O. Box 960  
Clinton, WA 98236

Telephone: 360-579-2505  
Fax: 360-579-2575  
E-mail: [anmlpepl@whidbey.com](mailto:anmlpepl@whidbey.com)  
Web: [www.animalpeoplenews.org](http://www.animalpeoplenews.org)

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