

Bird Flu Fears Grow

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Experts warn that the geography and ignorance put the country at great risk of an epidemic. Birds in cages, large and small, line Straw Street in the centre of Kabul. Some of the shoppers are looking for a pet; others are inspecting a key ingredient for that night's dinner.

The last thing on anyone's mind here is the danger of bird flu. That's to be expected, since few of the merchants or shoppers have ever heard of the disease that has appeared in headlines around the world and spread fear of a possible global pandemic.

But with the country's high rate of illiteracy and general lack of access to radio or television news, word travels slowly in Afghanistan.

Mohammad Ashraf, 67, sits in front of a cage filled with ducks and chickens. When asked about bird flu, he just shrugged. "I have been selling birds for 40 years," he told IWPR. "I know all kinds of birds, but I've never heard of a bird called bird flu."

When told that "flu" was a virus potentially fatal to both birds and humans, he shrugged again.

"This virus cannot affect the people of Afghanistan. Go away and let me sell my birds."

But Serge Verniau, the representative of the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation, FAO, in Afghanistan is all too familiar with the disease and he is worried. At a news conference in late January, Verniau warned that it posed a grave threat to the country.

"Afghanistan is at the juncture of several migratory routes, and there is a high possibility that the country could become infected," he told reporters. "We cannot say it is inevitable, but the risk is huge."

In an interview with IWPR, Verniau said that the FAO had asked donors for 1.5 million US dollars to support a campaign to prevent the spread of the disease.

But, he added, "If there is an outbreak, this money will not be enough. Afghanistan's veterinary services are very weak, and the disease will spread very quickly."

Doctor Azizullah Osmani, head of animal husbandry and veterinary services at the ministry of agriculture, said the ministry has undertaken an aggressive media campaign to warn people about bird flu. He acknowledges, however, that more needs to be done.

"In Afghanistan, many local people keep birds in their homes. They are illiterate, and so do not get very much information. Therefore, the danger of bird flu among them is high. It could kill them very quickly," he said.

According to Osmani, there have as yet been no documented cases of the disease in Afghanistan. He said his ministry is monitoring bird populations in various parts of the country, including Kabul, to be on the lookout for outbreaks.

“This is a very serious concern for Afghanistan,” he said.

Birds from Europe, Turkey, Kazakstan, Iraq and Iran cross Afghanistan during their yearly migration, he said. Turkey, in particular, is a concern, after several people died after contracting the virus from birds.

But Osmani cautioned that it still has not been proven that the disease can be transmitted from one human to another. The cases so far documented are those where someone has become ill after coming in contact with an infected bird.

The World Health Organisation confirms that human-to-human transmission is quite rare.

The ministry of health is also involved in the campaign to prevent the spread of the disease.

Abdullah Fahim, an advisor to ministry, said that health officials have issued warning to medical centres to be watch for patients who could be infected. The ministry has also issued notices warning the population not to touch a bird that appears ill.

Those who are aware of the disease say they are now avoiding eating chicken, often the only meat most poor people can afford.

“My family is no longer eating chicken,” said Bismillah, 33, who said he had heard about bird flu on television. “We cannot afford beef or lamb; chicken is cheap, but now we don’t have that, either.”

Khair Mohammad, who has been selling poultry in Kabul for three years, said his business has been affected since reports of bird flu began to appear.

“In the past, I was selling five to six cartons of chicken meat daily, but now I only sell two to three,” he said. “This is not bird flu, it is poor people’s flu,” he added, laughing. “My business is suffering and poor people have no meat at all.”

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