

## **Bird Flu Scare Widens**

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Ten people suspected of being infected as official efforts to eradicate the virus run into trouble. Some Sulaimaniyah residents are resisting a government campaign to rid the province of the deadly bird flu virus until authorities pay for the poultry they are trying to cull.

Health teams are being sent out to round up and kill birds in this northeastern Kurdish province, where ten people with bird-flu like symptoms are under observation in hospital. But some locals are refusing to cooperate with authorities until they are compensated.

"I would rather they take me than my chickens," said Sabriya Muhammed, a 45-year-old resident in the city of Sulaimaniyah who owns more than 20 chickens.

"The government has lied about its compensation. So far, they haven't paid anyone."

A 14-year-old girl in the province died of the feared H5N1 bird flu virus last month in Sulaimaniyah. International health teams are investigating whether her uncle, who died shortly after, was also infected.

The bird flu scare spread through Iraq this week. Authorities declared a health alert in the Maysan province in the southeastern part of the country, news agencies reported, and ordered security forces to stop people from carrying birds in and out of the region.

The Kurdish regional administration has culled more than 685,000 birds in Sulaimaniyah province for fear of a widespread outbreak. Officials here have allocated 5 million US dollars of public funds to pay poultry farmers to cull their birds. But, so far, they've only issued documents promising they'll be paid an unspecified amount at an undetermined date.

"We're assuring [poultry owners] that we will compensate them, but we don't know how much we will pay them because we don't yet have a plan," said Tahssin Namiq, deputy minister of agriculture for the Sulaimaniyah administration.

But Namiq admitted culling teams faced problems in seizing poultry from those who are financially dependent on the birds. Some inspection teams have found birds hidden in closets and bathrooms.

"The government cannot be lax about this issue... because keeping the birds [alive] will increase the possibility that the virus will spread," he said.

Namiq said residents who kept their chickens would be fined but did not specify how much they would have to pay or whether the government is enforcing the policy. Health officials carrying out the culling did not indicate they were fining residents.

Zana Muhammed, who heads the teams culling birds in the city of Sulaimaniyah, said the teams have been easy on some residents, like Sabriya Muhammed, allowing them to keep some of their poultry if it seemed that they would otherwise face real hardship.

The Kurdish government said earlier this week that it would ask the central Iraqi authorities for extra funds to compensate poultry owners and fight the disease. Angry poultry farmers demanded compensation during a press conference on bird flu held by agriculture minister Ali al-Bahadli this week.

Bahadli said the Iraqi government would only pay bird owners within a 32-kilometre radius of Raniya, where the girl infected with the virus lived. But Kurdish officials have carried out a massive culling campaign that extended 150 km beyond Raniya to Sulaimaniyah city centre.

Meanwhile, health and veterinary experts from the World Health Organisation in Cairo and the United States have spent several days in Sulaimaniyah province inspecting health facilities and gathering samples.

Najmadeen Muhammed, who heads the Iraqi team attempting to eradicate the disease in Sulaimaniyah, said the Kurdish government has about 1,000 packets of Tamiflu - a drug used to treat people suffering bird flu symptoms - which he said was enough to treat the ten patients under observation as well as workers culling birds.

Sulaimaniyah residents had already changed their habits before the first case was officially reported but some do not understand how the disease can spread, said local officials. They believe that they can only be infected by eating poultry and therefore do not consider having chickens in their houses a risk.

Many locals are refusing to eat eggs or chicken and are not hanging their wash outside for fear they could get the disease from bird droppings. As a result of the scare, the price of lamb has jumped from about 4 dollars to 6 dollars per kilogramme, while fish prices have risen about 50 per cent, report local meat and fish sellers.

The Kurdish health ministry in Sulaimaniyah has also launched a bird flu awareness campaign in schools. Employing cartoons, it warns children to stay away from birds.

The government last month shut down live poultry markets in Sulaimaniyah, but sellers like Hesan Kareem, 29, are in no mood to stop trading. He says he's hidden between 3-400 chickens in a room, and sells them clandestinely.

"If the government pays me enough money, I will turn in all of my birds," he said. "But as of now, they're only making promises. I'm not ready to give them up based on speeches."

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