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AVIAN INFLUENZA, FALCON - CHINA (HONG KONG)

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Dead falcon may signal bird flu exists in China

A dead peregrine falcon found near 2 chicken farms [in Hong Kong] had the avian influenza virus, the 1st sign that the disease spreading in chicken flocks in Vietnam, South Korea, and Japan may also be present in China, agricultural officials said here on Wednesday.

Hong Kong said it would respond by stepping up the monitoring of chicken farms for the disease, with inspections continuing through the Chinese New Year holidays over the next 3 days.

World Health Organization officials have been alarmed about the spread of the influenza virus, the H5N1 strain of bird flu. They have been calling it "unprecedented" and have warned that the disease could evolve to spread from person to person, and not just from birds to people.

The agency has confirmed 5 cases in people so far in Vietnam, all of whom apparently contracted the disease from chickens and all of whom have died.

Hong Kong began actively testing wild birds in March 2003, after 2 residents became infected with H5N1 and one died. Agricultural officials have collected over 6000 samples from wild birds since then, and discovered no infections until the falcon.

An agricultural worker found the falcon's body on Monday less than 11 kilometers (7 miles), from the border between Hong Kong, a special autonomous region of China, and Shenzhen, an adjacent Chinese city. But Lai Ching-wai, Hong Kong's assistant director for agricultural inspection and quarantine, said experts could not guess where the rare bird became infected.

Hong Kong has 10 peregrine falcons that live [in Hong Kong] all year long, typically foraging within a radius of 24 kilometers of their favorite roosts. But an additional 30 to 40 falcons winter [in Hong Kong] after migrating from breeding grounds as far away as Siberia. Hong Kong agricultural officials have not been able to determine whether the dead bird was migratory or resident.

Mr. Lai said that the migratory falcons do not travel to South Korea or Japan, which have been slaughtering chickens in response to outbreaks in those countries. China, Mongolia, and Russia have not acknowledged having any cases of H5N1 bird flu.

Roy Wadia, a spokesman in Beijing for the WHO, said the agency had asked the Ministry of Health there a few days ago for details about what it is doing to prevent the spread of the disease in China, but has not yet received a reply.

The Agriculture Ministry in China did announce on Monday that it was requiring local governments to report daily on whether they had detected any cases of bird flu. China has also banned poultry imports from infected countries.

Pathologists are conducting tests to determine whether the Hong Kong falcon died of the virus or some other cause. While H5N1 is lethal to domesticated fowl and has an estimated 30 percent mortality rate in people, it appears to cause less harm to wild fowl, which are believed to spread the disease.

Hong Kong has had a half-dozen outbreaks of H5N1 in local birds since 1997,

when 18 people were infected and 6 of them died. The persistent recurrence of the disease here has fanned suspicions about whether the disease is present in southern China, although Chinese officials have denied this.

China's other health threat this winter, severe acute respiratory syndrome, seems to be receding, at least temporarily, with the release from hospital on Wednesday of the last of 3 patients in Guangzhou, up the Pearl River from Hong Kong.

[Byline: Keith Bradsher]

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