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Secretary for the Environment and Food announces measures to prevent spread of avian flu

The following is the transcript of the English portion of the statement and question and answer session given by the Secretary for the Environment and Food, Mrs Lily Yam, today (May 18):

In order to arrest the spread of Avian Influenza amongst chickens, and in the longer term to protect public health, the government has decided to step up action. On Wednesday we closed the poultry stalls of three markets. Yesterday, in a fourth market, the Tai Shing Street Market in Wong Tai Sin, we discovered that an extraordinarily high number of chickens have died. This morning, the same situation was found in a fifth market - Pei Ho Street Market in Shamshuipo.

In the three markets that we closed, and in the two markets which I described just now, post mortems of samples of dead chickens have revealed that they died of influenza. In addition, we found that in five other markets chickens also died of influenza, bringing the total number of markets in which birds have died of influenza to 10, including the three that we closed on Wednesday.

Having consulted experts within the government - experts and professionals, experts outside of government, academics, microbiologists, we feel that there is a need to take determined and comprehensive action and this is precisely what we are going to do.

This afternoon we will close the poultry sections of the seven markets where chickens have already died - (where) it has been proven where chickens have already died of influenza. These seven markets are:

Tai Shing Street Market in Wong Tai Sin

Pei Ho Street Market in Sham Shui Po

Po On Road Market in Sham Shui Po

Ngau Tau Kok Market in Kwun Tong

San Hui Market in Tuen Mun

Yan Oi Street Market in Tuen Mun, and

Bowrington Road Market in Wan Chai.

As you would have noticed, together with the three markets that we closed on Wednesday, these 10 markets are spread throughout Hong Kong Island,

Kowloon and the New Territories. This attests to the fact that we are dealing with an acute and virulent virus affecting chickens.

So, as I have said earlier, this particular strain of virus will not affect human beings. But there is always the possibility, however remote, that this virus may combine with other strains to give rise to a new strain which may affect human beings. Having made this point, I must reiterate yet again that we are not dealing with the same virus that affected human beings in Hong Kong in 1997. They are not the same virus.

Nonetheless, for the reasons that I explained earlier, in other words to arrest the spread of the influenza amongst our chicken population, and in the longer term to prevent the possibility of these viruses re-assorting and giving rise to a new one which may affect human beings, with effect from this afternoon we will start action in the seven markets whose names I mentioned just now. The poultry sections of these seven markets will be closed, the poultry there will be depopulated and these markets will be thoroughly cleansed.

Tomorrow (May 19), we will take similar action in all remaining markets under the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department. The day after tomorrow (Sunday), similar action will be taken in Housing Department Markets and in fresh provision stores selling live poultry.

Again, tomorrow, the same action will be taken in our wholesale markets. And starting from Monday, in an action lasting for about two weeks, action will also be taken to destroy the chickens and other birds which are of such maturity as to make them suitable to be sent to the retail outlets, we will be destroying this particular group of birds in our local farms.

There is no evidence at the moment that our wholesale markets and our local farms have been contaminated but veterinary advice attests to the fact that if these birds were left in the cages for a prolonged period they would die, and since the retail outlets have been closed and will remain closed for four weeks, we feel that there is a need to destroy the birds in the wholesale markets and the group of birds, those of an appropriate maturity to be sent for sale, in our local farms.

The number of birds to be destroyed in our retail markets would number about 90,000 (nine zero thousand); those at the wholesale markets, including ducks and geese, would be 43,500 (forty-three thousand and five hundred); that particular group of birds that I described just now in our local farms, number about 1,060,000 (one million and sixty thousand), bringing the total number of birds to be destroyed in this exercise to almost 1.2 million (one point two million). This is a large-scale exercise but we feel that early and determined action has to be taken to arrest the influenza amongst our bird population and to avoid the possibility, no matter how remote, of this particular strain combining with others to form a new strain which may affect human beings.

Why does it take us two weeks to destroy this particular category of birds in our local farms? I must reiterate there is no sign of infection in our local farms - although we will be monitoring the situation very closely - so the urgency is not there. There are 207 farms in Hong Kong scattered over a wide area. Some of them are not accessible to motor transport, so we will be taking a deliberate and well-organized approach to systematically destroy the birds in our farms.

We have informed the Mainland authorities so that they will stop sending live poultry to Hong Kong. At this very moment the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene is meeting representatives of market stallholders, and the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation is meeting representatives of the wholesale trade and of the local farms.

We will be making ex-gratia payments to the parties affected along the same lines as the arrangement in 1997. It would amount to over \$80 million. Much as I would like to make these ex-gratia payments available to the parties affected as early as possible, the fact remains that we have to observe laid down procedures and seek the approval of the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council. This we will do as soon as possible.

I wish to reiterate once again, that we have an effective and comprehensive monitoring system at every level - at the place of origin, at the border, in our retail outlets. If we do not have such a system we will not be able to detect this occurrence at an early stage and take appropriate and commensurate action.

This is the second similar incident in four years - similar but not identical. The strain that we are dealing with - bear with me I have to repeat it again - affects only chickens and birds, it does not affect human beings. We are taking this as a responsible and precautionary measure.

There is a need for us to step up hygiene standards and cleanliness in our retail markets and to do this we need the co-operation of stallholders. And this co-operation, the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene is seeking right now. We need to make some long-term improvements.

At the same time, in the last couple of days, there has already been a certain amount of discussion on the viability of having a central slaughtering system in Hong Kong. This calls for a change in the eating habits and other habits of our people. At the same time it is also likely to have a knock on effect on the wholesale and retail poultry trade and on the comparatively large number of people employed in these businesses.

My immediate task is to complete the depopulation and cleansing exercise according to plan and within the time that we lay down. But I would also suggest that it is an appropriate time for the community to start a discussion on longer-term arrangements. We have a well-organized and well thought out operational plan. I have every confidence in the capability of my colleagues and in the co-operation of stallholders and the poultry trade.

Thank you very much.

Questions and Answer Session :

Dr. Saw : In the case of prevention of influenza, I think from the public point of view it is essential that you maintain a good balanced diet and get exercise and rest. This will increase your resistance to influenza. And of course, as we have repeatedly emphasized, it is necessary that you observe good personal hygiene and food hygiene.

Q : Mrs Yam, your Bureau owes its existence to the Bird Flu '97 particularly, and now we see another mass culling which is similar but not identical, as you said, to the '97 incident. So does this mean that the Bureau somehow has failed or is it that man simply cannot win over nature - flu is such a very

tricky virus. And the other thing is, maybe these measures aren't enough. Maybe it's really time to really consider seriously that there should be a central slaughterhouse for poultry, or segregation of markets or whatever, and really tell the public that we need to change our eating habits. Otherwise we will see this culling every four years and lose money every time.

SEF: My Bureau was set up on 1st January 2000, but I think in fact you could rephrase your question from Bureau to Government, isn't it. I have already explained on a number of occasions in the last few days that we have a comprehensive and effective monitoring system. The essence of the monitoring system is not to prevent certain things from happening. The whole purpose of the monitoring system is really to enable us to be alerted as soon as we discover something; it's to enable us to discover something wrong as soon as possible so that we can take corresponding action. That is the essence of the monitoring system.

If you speak to overseas authorities you would find that insofar as the health of chickens and poultry and so on is concerned, after the 1997 incident Hong Kong must have about the best monitoring system to prevent such an outbreak.

Now, I would like to take up your point on prevention. The lady from another paper has already raised this. Insofar as our public markets are concerned, I believe that there is room for improvement in both the hygiene standards and in the cleanliness of our markets. This, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department would do. But it also needs the support of stallholders, people who are actually operating from those markets. At this very moment the Director of Food and Environmental Hygiene is meeting representatives of poultry stallholders with a view to explaining the action we are taking, with a view to seeking their support for all these measures to improve market hygiene, and I would hope that we can work out some longer-term measures with the co-operation of the trade.

Q : Mrs Yam, regarding the source, you mentioned that there could be many possibilities. Does it mean that you have encountered great difficulty in tracing the source or there may be a possibility that you won't be ABLE TO FIND IT AT ALL?

SEF : Well, we are still tracing the source. We are not giving up on the process. What I said earlier was that it would be an over-simplification of the matter to feel that tracing the source we would find the solution to our problem and stop the problem at source, because contamination and infection could take place at various means. It could take place during the course of transportation; at any one time there could be viruses in the air, in our environment and so on. And it is for this very reason that we are doing all we can in the retail markets and so on, first of all to depopulate the poultry there and then to follow it up with a number of intense cleansing and disinfecting operations.

Q :

Dr. Sims : The testing on the chickens was the rapid test to detect whether these birds had died from influenza, and the birds had in fact died from influenza. We will continue to do more testing on these birds to find out more information about the viruses and as we have those results we will certainly keep you informed of those.

Q:

Dr. Sims : Birds go to market sometime between 95 and 105 days of age as a general rule, so these are the sorts of birds that we will be looking to destroy on the farms.

End/Friday, May 18, 2001

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