



Lessons from the Bird Flu Epidemic

by Eric Teo Chu Cheow

Avian or “bird” flu has spread across 10 countries in Asia, from China to Pakistan, through Indochina and Indonesia; the number of deaths has topped 20. The regional meeting called by Thailand in Bangkok on Jan. 28 highlighted the flu’s “regional dimension,” as well as the necessity for both regional cooperation and a regional approach in eradicating the problem.

The avian flu has also driven home to the governments and peoples of Asia four sets of implications or lessons, which are confirming monumental changes in Asia politically, economically, socially, and in terms of expanding regionalism.

Politically, the avian flu is creating a renewed awareness of the need for good governance, especially government transparency and accountability. In a replay of China’s political debacle during its initial months of SARS a year ago, Asians are once again demanding accountability in public health. Thailand’s Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra is facing a barrage of criticisms for earlier cover-ups in order to protect booming Thai exports, domestic consumption and confidence, and tourism dollars. China has endeavored to come clean on how rapidly the flu is spreading across its territory; political leaders, like Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, have reached out to destitute farmers from Hubei to Anhui.

Even in Indonesia, which initially resisted the mass culling of affected chickens, President Megawati finally succumbed to pressure from the World Health Organization and international opinion to take more active and drastic action to protect public health, despite incurring the wrath of poultry farmers across the country ahead of crucial elections this year. Furthermore, there have been unconfirmed reports that Indonesian authorities could have been covering up the extent of the spreading H5N1 virus for the whole of last year, as chickens had already been reportedly dying *en masse* in some Indonesian outlying provinces and islands. It was probably this political embarrassment that “forced” the hand of Indonesian leaders to “come clean” after the Bangkok meeting.

In all cases, Asian leaders are acutely aware that public confidence is of utmost importance, especially in an electoral year like 2004-2005, for Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia, and South Korea. Even in countries with no elections this year, such as China, Vietnam, and Cambodia, political confidence is also at stake, as they battle the contagion. Government accountability and transparency appear to be *de rigueur* and good public governance is now crucial, thanks first to the SARS epidemic and now, avian flu. Given its severity (and the number of deaths there), Vietnam’s leaders are critically aware of the need to safeguard their political legitimacy.

In economic terms, the avian flu again underscores the importance of domestic consumption, agricultural exports, and tourism in Asian economies. Domestic consumption has propped up Asian economies since the 1997-98 Asian crisis; any drastic drop in consumer confidence, as in the case of Thailand, could lead to a full-blown consumption and economic crisis (through plunging poultry and related exports), with severe repercussions for the booming Thai economy. An economic slowdown has already been perceptible in Thailand for the past three weeks as the stock market and the currency slide; an added danger for Asian economies, like those of Thailand, China, Vietnam, Cambodia and Indonesia, would be the impact of the flu on their tourist and travel industries, especially when these sectors rake in sizeable revenue. For Asian leaders, the avian flu must not be allowed to “wreck” the current economic recovery and cause chaos in the region!

One of the most important lessons of the avian flu crisis today is the importance and urgency of bridging the socio-economic gap between the richer urban communities and poorer rural ones. The rapid spread of the flu epidemic has again revealed the extent of poverty in rural Asia and the socio-economic cleavages in Asian societies. For example, a controversy is brewing in Thailand over the “injustice” of culling chicken in the poorer rural farms (despite modest compensation from the government), whereas poultry bred by big agricultural conglomerates and those around the Bangkok periphery need only to be vaccinated to be spared. This “inequity” could become a political thorn in the flesh for the Thaksin administration, if mishandled. Meanwhile in Indonesia, there were also initial concerns that “unfair” vested interests had prevented the culling of millions of poultry (the charge was denied by the authorities), or worse, had maintained monopolistic control of vaccines imported from China. But in China, it was decided that for the sake of equality, all affected poultry within a certain radius of the discovered virus would be systematically culled, whereas those within a wider radius must be vaccinated; the government has also promised that compensation for affected farmers would be fairly and urgently expedited.

In agricultural Asia, therefore, there is a crucial need for a coordinated socio-economic uplift. Like SARS, which originated in poorer parts of the continent, the flu underscores the importance of a more aggressive policy in wiping out poverty and “balancing” society. Beneath the vertiginous boom of Asia still lies a “poor” economy and a marginalized society, which could not only breed diseases, but also sow the seeds of social unrest and political destabilization, especially if these poverty-stricken areas are left behind. Social policies need to be urgently designed, redesigned, and implemented in order to “safeguard” stability across Asia; this is the most

significant political dimension of the current avian flu epidemic.

Lastly, the flu has highlighted once again, like SARS, the increasing interdependence of Asia, its economies, and societies. With the liberalization of trade and travel across the continent, Asian regionalism has *de facto* become a reality, although Asian governments still harbor concerns over deepening regionalism. The growing “inter-connectivity” of Asian economies and societies should be strengthened; in fact, thanks to such epidemics, East Asian cooperation has increased, thus setting the pace and momentum for a true “ASEAN+3” regional framework, beyond trade and investments alone. The avian flu crisis has highlighted the necessity of deepening cooperation in all areas, ranging from health and the environment to financial and social policy coordination. Only through effective regional cooperation can

such scourges be eradicated, socio-economic gaps (within the region and individual countries) bridged, and stability guaranteed for the longer term.

Asian governments and public opinion are thus assimilating the lessons of the current avian flu epidemic politically, economically, socially, and regionally; these lessons should ultimately benefit Asia in its continuous transformation and change.

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