

NOTE

Of Flu and Big Business

N L writes :

They know how to cash in on misery of the poor the business community. It originated in China-the Avian flu but the 'plague' seems to be spreading like wild fire across the globe. While governments and UN agencies have found a convenient scapegoat in backyard poultrykeepers and migratory birds, the global giants engaged in poultry business are in reality not only behind the spread of bird flu, but are also using it drive small producers out of business.

Conservation groups and organisations supporting sustainable agriculture have long argued that migratory birds and backyard poultry cannot be the main vectors of avian flu. The pattern of outbreaks doesn't follow the flyways of migratory birds, and the timing is wrong. There is, however, a strong correlation with trade routes such as the trans-Siberian railway.

After a year of being dismissed as the special pleading of pressure groups more concerned with biodiversity and animal welfare than human health and nutrition, these arguments have begun to receive heavyweight academic backing.

Writing in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 28 of the world's leading avian-influenza virology specialists found that poultry from China had repeatedly spread the virus to neighbouring and more distant countries like Vietnam and Indonesia, and that 'transmission within poultry is the major mechanism for sustaining H5N1 endemicity in the region'.

Other evidence, albeit circumstantial, comes from reports prepared by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). These show that outbreaks in one Asian country after another began in intensive poultry farms, which had taken day-old chicks directly from Thailand, the regional hub of the poultry business.

The Thai poultry industry is a major presence in China, with one company claiming to operate in all but three provinces. Thai poultry companies have also invested heavily in Turkey, where UN trade figures show live poultry imported from Thailand.

The correlation between outbreaks and industry is compelling. What's more, poultry multinationals, having propagated and spread the disease, are using avian flu as a pretext for tightening their grip on world food production. Thai giant CP Foods, for example, which claims to control 80% of industrial poultry production in Vietnam, plans to double its output there to a million chickens per week by the end of the year.

Backyard producers, geared to local and family needs, don't send their birds across borders, and avian flu outbreaks in small-holdings tend to burn themselves out. But if

the FAO gets its way, the export-driven poultry production model, riddled with corruption and prone to lapses of control even in the best regulated countries could be the only one people have. ~~////~~