

COMMENT

And Now Swine Flu!

Mad Cow Disease. Bird Flu. And now Swine Flu. It is not yet a menace in India as only 30 cases of swine flu victims have been reported by the authorities so far. But India with poor health care delivery system and insignificant investment in health could be vulnerable to swine flu epidemic.

Strictly speaking swine flu is meat industry's latest plague. Once again the governments have come too late to respond positively and bungled in cover-ups. And once again, the global meat industry is at the centre of the story, ramping up denials as the weight of evidence about its role grows.

Just five years after the start of the H5N1 bird flu crisis, and after as many years of a global strategy against influenza pandemics coordinated by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), the world is now reeling from a swine flu disaster. The global strategy has failed and needs to be replaced with a public health system that the public can trust.

Mexico is in the midst of a hellish repeat of Asia's bird flu experience, though on a more deadly scale.

Experts have been warning for years that the rise of large-scale factory farms in North America has created the perfect breeding grounds for the emergence and spread of new highly-virulent strains of influenza. "Because concentrated animal feeding operations tend to concentrate large numbers of animals close together, they facilitate rapid transmission and mixing of viruses," said scientists from the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) in 2006. Three years earlier, *Science Magazine* warned that swine flu was on a new evolutionary "fast track" due to the increasing size of factory farms and the widespread use of vaccines in these operations.

It is not the first time and it will not be the last time that corporate farms conceal disease outbreaks and put people's lives at risk. It is the nature of their business.

In Indonesia, where people are still dying from bird flu and where many health experts believe the next pandemic virus will emerge, authorities can still not enter large corporate farms without the permission of the company. In Mexico, authorities deflected calls to investigate La Granja Carroll and accused the residents of La Gloria of spreading infection because "they use home remedies instead of going to the health centres to cure their flu."

Factory farms are time-bombs for global disease epidemics. Yet, there are still no programmes in place to deal with them, not even programmes of independent disease surveillance.

In the meantime, the pharmaceutical industry is making a killing from the crisis. The US government has already opened an emergency window in its authorisation system to allow antivirals like *Tamiflu* and *Relaxin* to be used more widely on flu sufferers than allowed. This is great news for Roche, Gilead and Glaxo SmithKline, who hold monopolies on the drugs. But even more importantly, a swathe of smaller vaccine producers like Biocryst and Novavax are seeing their share prices shoot through the roof.

Tragically, at a time when public opinion against factory farms is gaining momentum across the globe, India's neo-liberal reformers including left reformers who see only virtues in rapid industrialisation at any cost, hope to meet the growing demand of food by way of investing in factory farm which could not be anything but disastrous. □□□