

NOTE

BIRD FLU

Bharat Dogra writes :

Due to recent out-break of bird-flu in the state of W Bengal in India, as many as 3 million birds were culled. Additional culling was ordered in neighbouring states.

Whenever there is an outbreak of bird-flu large scale culling of birds takes place. Culling is ordered even when an outbreak of bird-flu is not confirmed but there is a scare about it. No one likes killing lakhs of birds, but authorities say that this cannot be avoided. However, a question needs to be raised whether it is possible to avoid large-scale culling.

It is true that leading international organisations like the FAO, WHO and the World Organisation for Animal Health had initially advised killing all birds on farms near an outbreak as an effective means of control. However, this was in 2003-04, at an early stage of the outbreak of avian flu in Asia.

It was subsequently seen that large-scale culling had not always proved effective in checking the disease. So it becomes difficult to justify the killing of so many birds. The FAO and the World Organisation for Animal Health reversed their decision in 2005, saying that "for ethical, ecological and economical reasons, culling should no longer be used as a primary means of control". On 11 April 2005 the FAO (Rome) issued a press release to this effect. This was followed soon by a report in the prestigious journal 'Nature' - Vaccination will work better than culling—say bird flu experts (April 14, 2005)

What is more, the condition in which the birds have been culled in India is likely to have exposed many workers to severe hazards.

While the extent of the threat posed by avian flu to human beings is debated, another aspect which is not getting adequate attention is the extent to which big business (and powerful politicians in collusion with big business) are trying to quickly make millions (or is it billions?) of dollars out of this threat of a pandemic.

Powerful interests have pushed for a controversial strategy to face the avian flu threat which is based on a huge stockpiling of those medicines whose effectiveness has not yet been proved. Other countries have also started following a similar strategy. Thus billions of dollars are being spent on medicines whose effectiveness is not yet adequately proved and even if these are actually needed, production of this generic medicine is possible at a fraction of the existing price.

Secondly, this threat of avian flu is being used very shrewdly to further increase the power of a few giant companies in the world poultry industry. However in reality it is the system of 'factory farming' practised by big companies which creates conducive conditions for the rapid spread of diseases because of the overcrowding and genetic uniformity.□