

Hong Kong expert warns of "terrible" China bird-flu outbreak (Roundup)

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Hong Kong - Experts in Hong Kong were carrying out tests Tuesday on dead birds washed up on beaches amid fears of a large unreported avian-flu outbreak in neighboring mainland China.

The discovery of the dead birds brought a warning from one of the territory's top bird-flu experts that 'something very terrible' could be happening in China.

Three of 12 birds found on the Hong Kong island of Lantau in the past five days have so far tested positive for H5N1, the bird-flu strain that can be deadly in humans.

Islanders said dead birds have been washing ashore in recent days and they believe they come from China's Pearl River Delta, which flows out into the South China Sea surrounding Hong Kong.

On Monday alone, the carcasses of one goose, five chickens, a duck and two other birds were found, bringing to 12 the number of dead birds found on Lantau since Thursday.

China has in the past hushed up outbreaks of bird flu and SARS, or severe acute respiratory syndrome, which was rampant in southern China before it spread to Hong Kong and other countries around the world in 2003, killing hundreds of people.

Five people in China died of bird flu in January alone, two more than in the whole of 2008. Three other people were infected.

However, speaking on Hong Kong's government-run [radio station](#) RTHK Tuesday, infectious diseases expert Lo Wing-Lok warned that the outbreak in China could be far bigger than officials have admitted.

'This is suddenly something very serious,' said Lo, a legislator and chairman of the Hong Kong Medical Association. 'We have to confirm the source of these dead birds, whether it is local or from the mainland.'

'If they are from the mainland, something very terrible could be happening across the border.'

Lo said there were already indications that 'something extraordinary' was happening in China because of the large number of bird-flu cases reported in a short period of time.

'In January, there were eight human cases reported to have come down with H5N1 infection,' Lo said. 'The source of the infection, of course, is poultry.'

'Poultry infection may be widespread in the mainland and because of that, [infected] birds may find their way across the border through the water currents, through fishing boats, from visitors bringing a few birds at a time. These are all possibilities we need to consider.'

A Hong Kong government spokesman said officials were working with mainland authorities to try to work out the source of the dead birds on the island, which has no poultry farms.

He said the Hong Kong government would 'conduct a study on water currents and weather' to see if the carcasses were being washed ashore from China.

The World Health Organization said China has recorded 38 bird-flu cases since the disease resurfaced in 2003, including 25 deaths.

Hong Kong saw the first outbreak in modern times of bird flu to infect humans in 1997 when six people died and 12 others were infected but survived.

Since then, it has carried out two mass culls and introduced strict market controls and border controls with China, avoiding human deaths in any of the recent bird-flu outbreaks to sweep the region.