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Taiwan to Ban Wet Market Poultry Slaughter Due to H7N9 Concerns

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Report Highlights:

On April 24, 2013, Taiwan's Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC) confirmed the island's first case of H7N9 avian influenza in a 53 year-old Taiwan male. This is the first confirmed H7N9 incident outside of mainland China. Taiwan authorities announced that starting May 17, 2013, poultry slaughter in traditional markets will be banned due to H7N9 concerns.

BACKGROUND

On April 16, 2013, a Taiwan citizen who worked in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, China was hospitalized after developing flu-like symptoms following his return to Taiwan from Shanghai five days earlier. Two separate throat swabs initially produced a negative result for H7N9 before a third specimen tested positive for the virus on April 22. The patient is reportedly in critical care at Taipei's National Taiwan University Hospital.

On April 24, 2013, Taiwan's Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC) confirmed this as the island's first case of H7N9 avian influenza. This is also the first confirmed H7N9 incident outside of mainland China. Taiwan authorities subsequently announced that starting May 17, 2013, poultry slaughter in traditional markets will be banned due to H7N9 concerns. Before confirmation of this case, Taiwan authorities had sought to implement a slaughter ban starting on June 17, 2013.

Neither domestic nor international health authorities have confirmed human-to-human transmission of the virus and instead consider poultry to be the most likely source. The Taiwan patient claims to have had no contact with poultry or other birds or wildlife during his time in China.

DOMESTIC RESPONSE TO H7N9

On April 3, 2013, Taiwan's Executive Yuan approved the establishment of the CECC for Influenza A (H7N9) within the National Health Command Center (NHCC). After the 2003 SARS epidemic, Taiwan authorities established the NHCC, whose operation largely mirrors that of the U.S. Incident Command System. The CECC, housed in the Department of Health's Centers for Disease Control (CDC), is a communications center designed to facilitate inter-agency coordination in the event of a medical or disease crisis. As in the case of H7N9, when the scale of the situation warrants action, NHCC establishes a crisis command center, formulates task forces and details government involvement.

On April 27, 2013, the COA initiated a seven-day public comment period on the draft regulation to ban wet market poultry slaughter. The draft rules would limit chicken, duck and goose slaughter to COA-licensed facilities. There are currently three proposed exemptions: 1) chicken, ducks or geese slaughtered at resident's homes for their own personal use; 2) chicken/ducks/geese slaughtered at the local authority-managed retail markets in any of the thirty (30) aboriginal villages registered with the Ministry of Interior Affairs; and 3) chicken/ducks/geese slaughtered at local authority-managed/licensed slaughter houses in Taiwan's offshore islets. Penalties of "not less than" NT\$20,000 (USD \$670) will be levied against anyone found breaking the law, according to Taiwan's Bureau of

Animal and Plant Health Inspection and Quarantine Deputy Director. The final rule is expected to be finalized in early May. The implementation date, May 17, will be promulgated together with the final rule.

Taipei City Mayor, Hau Lung-bin, announced a one-time cash compensation of NT\$100,000 (USD\$3,390) to each wet market poultry vendor impacted by the ban with the intent being to aid a transition to alternative poultry meat sales methods; no details have yet been publicized. The decision to expand this compensation to wet market vendors throughout Taiwan lies with the COA Chairman. According to COA contacts, the idea is under consideration but no decision has been made.

This is not the first time the idea of banning poultry slaughter at traditional markets has been discussed in Taiwan. Due to previous avian influenza outbreaks as well as petitions from local animal rights groups, the COA has tried three times since 2003 to shutter traditional poultry markets and shift operations to certified slaughterhouses. However, local producer groups, wet market vendors, poultry middlemen and some specialty restaurants were previously successful in fending off these actions. COA officials have increased the testing of local poultry and livestock farms. Moreover, the TCDC has reinforced quarantine activities at air and sea ports and strengthened fever screening of passengers, particularly those from the Chinese provinces where the disease has been reported. Finally, in what was described as a "landmark move in health cooperation," on April 20, 2013, Taiwan scientists received specimens of the H7N9 virus from China authorities. The virus samples will be used as a diagnostic tool and to create vaccines.

At present, approximately 1,050 vendors slaughter a total of 20,000 birds (primarily "tugi" birds, not the western-style broilers) every day in the local traditional markets throughout Taiwan. This compares to the 356 million birds killed annually in Taiwan's 79 licensed poultry slaughter houses. In its announcement, the COA noted that the certified slaughter houses could fill the demand for fresh poultry meat. Taiwan is 85% self-sufficient in poultry though imports have been on the rise in recent years. The number of fresh-kill poultry vendors has been on a downward trajectory as consumer preferences have changed, and customers look to the larger, western-style grocery stores for their fresh meat and seafood. Moreover, the local "tugi" sector's output and consumption is anticipated to decline as the popularity of eating outside the home continues to increase and because the younger generation is typically less fond of "tugi" cuisine.

As international media outlets continue to report on the spread of the disease in China, a local media poll reported that 30% of Taiwan consumers claim to have cut their consumption of poultry meat and egg products. The COA, however, believes that consumers' stated avoidance of poultry meat and egg products is temporary and will not greatly impact Taiwan's supply and/or demand unless the disease spreads to Taiwan and/or additional human cases are confirmed on the island. As a result, Taiwan's

imports of U.S. corn and soybeans for poultry feed are not expected to be significantly impacted.

