

China steps up human H7N9 avian flu prevention

A number of provinces in China have stepped up efforts to prevent H7N9 avian flu following reports of scattered human cases of the virus.

Authorities closed 280 live poultry trading and slaughtering venues in Suining city, southwest China's Sichuan Province, after four human H7N9 cases were reported in the city this year, according to the provincial health authorities.

Commerce officials in Suining have enhanced inspections to crack down on unlicensed poultry businesses.

The central province of Hubei has set up headquarters for the prevention and control of human H7N9 outbreak, according to the provincial Health and Family Planning Commission.

Hubei confirmed 19 human H7N9 cases from Jan.1 to Feb. 9, scattered across several cities. Two patients have been discharged from hospital after recovering. The province has dispatched 16 inspection teams to check on prevention efforts.

In Changsha, capital of central China's Hunan Province, all live poultry markets have been suspended. The province has reported 24 H7N9 cases, including five fatalities, this year.

Eastern China's Zhejiang Province ordered all markets across the province to halt live poultry trading by 6 p.m. Saturday, over bird flu concerns.

Staff with the Zhejiang Center for Disease Control and Prevention said that the province had entered a high season of bird flu outbreak.

In January alone, Zhejiang reported 35 infections of the H7N9 strain of bird flu. Contact with live poultry is the major source of infection, particularly in rural areas.

H7N9 is a bird flu strain first reported to have infected humans in China in March 2013. It is most likely to strike in winter and spring.

Beijing on Saturday reported a human H7N9 case. The patient is a 68-year-old man from Langfang city in neighboring Hebei Province.

Liaoning, Jiangsu, Shandong, Henan, Guangdong and Guizhou provinces have all reported human H7N9 cases this year.

Beijingers buy less fireworks during Spring Festival

Beijing saw a 30.5 percent fall in fireworks and firecracker sales during Spring Festival compared to last year, mainly due to pollution concerns, according to municipal authorities Sunday.

It is the sixth consecutive annual decline since 2012, according to the fireworks office of the municipal government. Firework-caused fires and injuries also dropped in the capital.

Spring Festival is the most important festival in the Chinese calendar. This year it fell on Jan. 28, the first day of the Chinese Lunar New Year.

The main celebration period traditionally lasts from the New Year's Eve to the 15th day of the first lunar month, or Lantern Festival.

Since Sunday, Beijing resumed its fireworks ban within the fifth ring road.

Nationwide, 444 cities have banned fireworks and 764 other cities imposed fireworks restrictions.

Gov't to increase protection of immovable cultural relics

The State Administration of Cultural Heritage plans to step up preservation of immovable cultural relics, amid rapid urbanization.

"Immovable cultural relics should be avoided as much as possible in the choosing of construction sites," according to a circular issued by the administration.

The circular clarified procedures for the removal of immovable cultural relic status, and said that if such cultural relics were destroyed by natural disasters or construction activity, authorities should review and establish whether they still had heritage value.

Authorities should also publish such information and solicit public opinion.

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Chinese soldier returns home after 54 years in India

At around 6 p.m. Saturday, Wang Qi set his feet on his homeland again in Xi'an, capital of northwest China's Shaanxi Province, after spending 54 years in a life drift in India.

"I'm finally home!" a sobbing Wang hugged his tearful brothers and sisters at Xi'an Xianyang International Airport.

Wang, a Chinese soldier, got lost in a forest on the China-India border in 1963. He was rescued by India's Red Cross Society and later handed over to Indian military. The military sentenced him in jail for seven years after regarding him as an "espionage."

Wang settled and married in a rural area in India after serving his sentence, but he always wanted to go home. During the past years, Wang sent many letters to his family members in Xuezhainan Village in Shaanxi's Qianxian

County, expressing his homesickness and the desire to go back.

To help Wang return home, the Chinese embassy in India made every effort to get him an exit permit. In 2013, he received a Chinese passport and financial support from the government, which made it possible for him to return.

In Wang's home village, groups of people lined outside the house of Wang's younger brother Wang Shun on Saturday, which happens to be China's Lantern Festival, a day that traditionally represents reunion.

"After all these years, he is finally coming back," Wang Shun said as he prepared a quilt for Wang Qi. "We bought the furniture in this room many years ago."

"He has not changed much, I can still recognize him," said local villager Wang Ming. "All of us in the village have been waiting for his return, and we are just happy that he made it."