

H7N9 virus might become drug-resistant



A worker disinfects poultry cages at a market in Suichuan county, Jiangxi province, on Sunday. The county has ordered the closure of local poultry markets from Saturday to March 10. [Li Jianping/For China Daily]

The new strain of H7N9 bird flu virus confirmed earlier this month could become drug-resistant, experts say, while a leading specialist in respiratory diseases warns that it might be resistant already.

Human cases have been rising in China.

The new strain, two human cases of which were reported in Guangdong province, shows resistance to oseltamivir phosphate, a commonly used drug in the prevention and treatment of flu, said Zhong Nanshan, a member of the Chinese Academy of Engineering, according to a report published on Sunday by Nanfang Daily, a newspaper in the provincial capital of Guangzhou.

Although the two patients are resistant to the drug, oseltamivir phosphate has been effective for most human H7N9 cases, Zhong was reported as saying. "This shows most H7N9 viruses have not mutated to the new strain," he said.

He Jianfeng, chief expert in infectious disease at the Guangdong Provincial Center for Disease Control and Prevention, said that although the new H7N9 strain shows resistance to the drug, the drug could still have an effect on the strain.

"Both patients have used oseltamivir phosphate before, so it is not known whether the drug resistance is caused by previous use of the drug or by a mutation of the virus," He told Nanfang Daily. "But the possible drug-

resistant nature of the new strain deserves more attention.”

Much of China has seen the H7N9 outbreak since the start of winter. In most cases, it has been linked to exposure to live poultry. In January alone, the Chinese mainland reported 192 human cases of the virus, including 79 deaths, making it the worst outbreak since the virus was first reported in China in 2013, according to the National Health and Family Planning Commission.

The total number of human cases this year increased to 296, including 94 deaths, as of Sunday, covering more than half of all provincial areas in China, China Central Television reported.

The new strain is more dangerous to poultry, but poses no new threat to humans, and it is not more infectious to humans at the moment, according to a statement by the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention on Feb 19. Current research shows that the H7N9 virus is not easily transmitted between humans, according to the World Health Organization.

Zhong could not be reached for comment on Sunday.

He Xiong, deputy director of the Beijing Center for Disease Prevention and Control, said the new strain does not result in increased risk of human-to-human transmission of the virus, but unlike other H7N9 viruses, it can cause diseases in poultry, which should be studied further.

Only two human H7N9 cases have been reported in Beijing this year, and both of them involve patients who are from other parts of China and were transferred to Beijing for treatment, He Xiong said.

“There may be sporadic cases, but the possibility of a large-scale outbreak in Beijing is slim, as authorities and the public are well prepared,” he said, adding that scientists are still conducting research into the virus to ascertain whether it is linked to climate, to ensure better prevention and control.

[China sees sharp decline in ivory smuggling in 2016](#)

The amount of smuggled ivory tracked down in China fell 80 percent in 2016 from previous peak years, the State Forestry Administration (SFA) said Sunday.

Liu Dongsheng, deputy head of the SFA, made the remarks at the opening ceremony of a wildlife protection campaign, without specifying detailed numbers.

China will stop commercial processing and sales of ivory by the end of this year. Last year, it imposed a three-year ban on ivory imports in an escalated fight against illegal trading of wild animals and plants.

The number of illegal wildlife trade cases has been on the decline since last year, said Liu.

Meanwhile, the numbers of critically endangered species in China, including giant pandas, crested ibis, Yangtze alligators and Tibetan antelopes, have been increasing steadily, he said.

China's newly-revised law on wild animal protection took effect at the start of this year, imposing harsher punishment on overkilling and illegal utilization of wild animals.

Over 800 seized for crimes related to underground banks

Chinese police seized more than 800 suspects in 380 major cases worth 900 billion yuan (US\$131 billion) related to underground banks in 2016, said the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) on Sunday.

A campaign against underground banks to maintain financial order and security is helping the country's anti-corruption drive recover the assets of fugitive officials, said the ministry.

In 2016, the ministry worked with the central bank and the State Administration of Foreign Exchange to crack down on the transfer of illicit money via offshore companies and underground banks.

Officials with the MPS said that the ministry will continue action against illegal private banks in cooperation with the central bank and the foreign exchanges regulator in 2017.

"For a long time, underground banks have become a fast channel to transfer money, for they are anonymous and hidden. Many criminals have taken advantage of the channel to transfer their illegal gains to the overseas," said Zhang Niannian, an official with the central bank.

Underground banks have also offered a quick passageway for corrupt officials to transfer their properties, Zhang added.

The central bank will track and analyze new methods of crimes, especially in special non-financial institutions and sector, and improve measures of anti-money laundering, Zhang said.

Shu Jianping, head of the anti-money laundering office of the economic crime

investigation division of the MPS, said that cases related to underground banks covered several industries, including foreign trade and real estates.

Harms of underground banks are increasing, Shu said, adding that local public security organs were urged to continue the campaign against underground banks.

[China steps up air pollution inspections](#)

China's environmental inspectors named and shamed more cities on Sunday for poor air quality control as the fight against smog continues.

Inspections of 18 cities in north China's Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei (BTH) region and nearby areas used unannounced checks at night and undercover methods, the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP) said.

Handan city of Hebei Province continues to illegally operate coal-fired boilers though officials had ordered them closed. After the inspections, the boilers were dismantled and a police investigation opened.

In Cangzhou, also in Hebei, an oil pipe maker, a major source of emissions, was not included in the list of companies to halt production on heavily polluted days.

A cement producer in Beijing used more electricity than usual in December, when it should have suspended production. Two other cement firms were wrongly exempted from production suspensions.

On Friday, the MEP criticized several cities in Hebei, Shanxi and Henan for not doing enough in curbing the use of "scattered coal," coal burned by households or small factories for heating and is much more dirty than that used by thermal plants, which have the equipment to reduce emissions.

China is intensifying efforts to fight pollution and environmental degradation after decades of growth left the country saddled with problems such as smog and contaminated soil.

A total of 720 people were detained and 6,454 held accountable in China for environment-related wrongdoing in 2016, according to earlier official information.

Chinese cities suffered from more days of air pollution in January, with northern areas being the worst affected.

The share of days with good air quality in BTH were a mere 36.2 percent in January, a year-on-year drop of 19.6 percentage points.

Revolutionary heartland casts off poverty

Jinggangshan, the heartland of the early revolutionary activities of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in east China's Jiangxi Province, announced Sunday that it has been officially taken off the list of impoverished areas.

Jinggangshan was home to the CPC's first rural revolutionary base established in 1927. Today, people who live under the poverty line account for 1.6 percent of the total population, lower than the national standard of 2 percent, according to the city government.

The local government contributed the precision poverty relief campaign, which is in full swing across the country. Precision means that money should be spent exactly where it is needed, and no more than is needed.

Jinggangshan helped people start businesses or find jobs, while provided a safety net for those who were unable. In addition, it also helped poor people move into quality homes and improved infrastructure in rural areas.

The Chinese government has decided to eradicate poverty by 2020, the target year for China to become a "moderately prosperous" society.