

Bad year ahead?

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IT is going to be a year that will be too hot to handle and portends danger. That is how an astrologer has described the coming year in the Chinese lunar calendar.

Generally, it is said the Fire Dog Year is not a good year, with some predicting the year as a year of diseases.

One feng shui master had categorically said that "the bird flu epidemic will worsen".

Eleventh in the lunar calendar cycle, Dog years follow Rooster years.

This time, given the prevailing bird flu threat, it looks like the Rooster, which is considered a bird (family: Phasianidae) will continue to make its presence felt.

Already, experts are worried that the deadly H5N1 virus could pose a big threat as people slaughter chickens for the New Year celebrations.



FOR CHINESE NEW YEAR: Bird flu has not hit the popularity of chicken.

To date the official death toll is at least 82 since the virus reemerged in late 2003, noted the World Health Organisation (WHO).

At least 60 people have died in Southeast Asia alone. The flu has spread to places as far as Turkey and into Europe as well. The death toll could be far more as countries are said to be lagging behind in reporting cases of bird flu.

The global reservoir of flu viruses in bird species is said to be astonishingly large with billions of virus particles silently replicating, exchanging genes, and mutating.

Occasionally, an otherwise mild bird influenza virus changes to become a highly pathogenic virus that can infect, kill and start an epidemic in domestic poultry.

Movement of poultry and poultry products, such as chicken manure, has been blamed for transferring the virus across national borders.

More recently, some scientists are suggesting that a person can be infected with bird flu and not display any symptoms. This implies that the disease can spread even more widely than previously thought.

In short, there could be hundreds who have had a mild flu infection and recovered from it without realising what had really happened as there are no apparent symptoms (asymptomatic).

This form of bird flu will make detection more difficult, thus allowing more to act as carriers for the virus.

Consequently, the likelihood of a pandemic is also heightened. As more people survive the bird flu, the greater is the opportunity for this to happen.

Scientists are trying their best to ascertain the impact of the asymptomatic bird flu.

"The virus could be adapting to humans," said an epidemiologist with WHO in Hanoi recently. "There're a number of indications it could be moving toward a more dangerous virus."

To make the situation more alarming, a report in the New England Journal of Medicine late last year said the recommended drug, commonly called oseltamivir (with the brand name Tamiflu) may not be as effective against bird flu as first thought. The report revealed that there were signs of resistance to the drug.

This means that should the virus mutate into a form capable of passing from human to human, and with no available effective drugs to fight the virus, it would present a very serious problem.

Indeed, last week, a review published by Lancet, the British medical journal, warned that there is no evidence that Tamiflu, which is being stockpiled by many countries, will work if a flu pandemic breaks out among humans.

In fact, none of the four existing drugs against influenza have much effect, leading the authors to warn against relying just on drugs to stamp out a potential avian flu pandemic.

They caution that complacency could get in the way of more useful public health measures — such as hygiene and isolation — to stop the spread of infection.

To date, the study has yet to receive convincing support from WHO. So far, the world body has not seen the need to change its recommendation for countries to keep a stockpile of the drug.

The drug is still said to be the best there is, though more studies have been suggested to confirm the new finding. However, overzealous use of the drug or using it inappropriately can reduce its usefulness due to the development of resistant strains.

All in all, it is safe to assume that the bird flu is here to stay, signalled by Hong Kong confirming its first case in fowl in a year and Indonesia reporting more deaths within the week, taking the nation's death toll up to 14.

Meanwhile, in France, a woman who recently returned from Turkey was hospitalised and is being tested for signs of the deadly H5N1 strain.

In other words, at no time should we let our guard down. We must continue to be vigilant against this potentially fatal infection.

Despite the grim prediction for the Year of the Dog, the Islamic New Year which falls just two days after the Chinese New Year could offer some practical alternatives.

The Islamic Lunar New Year, unlike the Chinese calendar, is not based on the lunar zodiac.

Instead, it coincides with a very significant historical event in the spread of Islam which began with the emigration of the Prophet Muhammad to the town of Yathrib, the Medina of today, in response to a divine command. Mecca then was the centre of paganistic, idolatory worship that Islam sought to reform.

This was made possible when the Prophet eventually returned to Mecca to perform the haj (pilgrimage) with a large group of followers nurtured during the period of emigration — better known as the Hijrah. The rest is history as Islam took its place as one of the world's youngest monotheistic faiths.

The Hijrah that brings with it the spirit of breaking from the past in preparation for a new future can offer a valuable lesson in the fight against any bird flu epidemic.

Bird flu, which is essentially a lifestyle disease, needs a clean break from the ways and habits of the past implicated in the spread of the disease. Unless bird flu is effectively contained, the future will continue to be dogged by grave uncertainties.

To the Chinese readers, here's wishing you all GongXi Fa Cai and to Muslim readers, Selamat Menyambut Awal Muharram.

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