

## Editorial

# *Stop the Avian Flu Pandemic!*

The fact that the flu season in the United States this year turned out to be relatively mild, should leave no one complacent. As world health experts have been screaming from the roof tops for the last year or more, the world stands on the brink of the outbreak of a new flu pandemic, against which emergency measures must be mounted immediately.

Starting in January of 2004 in Thailand and Vietnam, a new, virulent avian flu began to infect people who were in direct contact with chickens and ducks. To date, there have been at least 55 cases, and an alarming 45 deaths, or nearly 72% mortality. The virus has been isolated, and it is a new variant of the H5N1 first seen in Hong Kong in 1997, but with increased lethality.

In October 2004, Thai health officials announced the first probable case of person-to-person transmission of this new and deadly H5N1 influenza virus, prompting quick action from the WHO to isolate and examine it, in preparation for making a prototype vaccine.

This new virus, if confirmed, appears to be exactly what the experts have been worried about since 1997—a new strain of avian flu, that has recombined genetically so it can spread from person to person. This particular virus has a mortality rate over 70% so far, although the number of cases is still very small, and extrapolating from this small sample may be unreliable. Even if it is only half that rate of mortality, it would be much deadlier than the 1918 Spanish Flu virus, and would have the potential to kill tens of millions of people if the world is caught in a situation as unprepared as we are now.

In the United States, Julie Gerberding, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), described the danger of an avian flu outbreak as a “worrisome situation,” in a statement on Feb. 22. The day before, in an address to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, she had said, “Our assessment is that this is a very high threat. . . . You may see the emergence of a new strain to which the human population has no immunity.”

Dr. Gerberding, Dr. Jeremy Farrar of the Hospital for Tropical Diseases in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, and many others are citing the precedents of the 1918,

1957, and 1968 pandemics, in terms of the potential for a killer flu pandemic today. The 1957 Asian flu began in Hong Kong in February of that year. By August, six months later, it had spread worldwide, causing 70,000 deaths in the United States alone. With increased mobility in the world today, and agricultural practices which further concentrate livestock, the pace of spread could be even more rapid.

An emergency meeting on the danger was held in Ho Chi Minh City the week of Feb. 22, hosted by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. The primary concern was animal hygiene, and how to best prevent wild flocks of geese and ducks (among which the virus is endemic) from intermingling with domestic poultry. The particular problem is that ducks and geese with the illness show no symptoms, but can still carry and transmit the flu.

What is immediately required is for governments to adopt the policy approach long proposed by Lyndon LaRouche. A priority, including all the resources required, must be put on public health measures, and for livestock as well as for human beings. Right now, there is grave concern about the ability of the Asian nations, such as Vietnam, where the avian flu is now concentrated, to adequately detect and fight the flu, including its incidence among humans. The nations afflicted should be receiving all the international aid they require.

These nations also require resources to carry out adequate animal hygiene, which has suffered enormously from the globalization and cartelization of the world’s food supply.

Lastly, resources must be provided for a massive international effort to develop adequate anti-viral medications, and vaccines—without taking necessary monies away from other public health requirements. What is required is the equivalent of a Biomedical “Strategic Defense Initiative,” a research mobilization that will put the best scientific minds together with the best laboratory and medical facilities, in order to head off the threat. This is what *should* have been done decades ago for AIDS, *before* it became the pandemic it is today. Our aim should be to stop this pandemic *before* it starts.