

Bird flu still a menace in Asia and beyond

HANOI: Thought bird flu was gone? Recent human deaths in Asia and Egypt are a reminder that the H5N1 virus is still alive and dangerous, and Vietnam is grappling with a new strain that has outsmarted vaccines used to protect poultry flocks.

Ten people have died in Cambodia, Indonesia, Egypt, China and Vietnam since December during the prime-time flu season when the virus typically flares in poultry.

"We are worried, and we will be very cautious," said To Long Thanh, director of Vietnam's Centre for Animal Health Diagnostics.

The H5N1 virus has killed 345 people worldwide since 2003, when it rampaged across large swaths of Asia—decimating poultry stocks before later surfacing in parts of Africa, the Middle East and Europe.

The number of poultry outbreaks has greatly diminished since then, but the virus remains entrenched in several countries and continues to surface sporadically, resulting in 20 to 30 human deaths in recent years.

Bird flu remains hard for people to catch, with most people sickened after being in close contact with infected poultry, but experts have long feared it could spark a pandemic if it mutates into a form that spreads easily among people. — AP