

Culling of 50,000 poultry begins in West Bengal

West Bengal Monday resumed culling operation to slaughter about 50,000 poultry birds in Murshidabad district where the deadly H5N1 virus resurfaced nearly a month after the government claimed avian flu had been contained in the state.

A fresh outbreak of bird flu was confirmed Friday in two areas of Murshidabad district, about 300 km from here, almost a month after the state culled nearly four million birds to combat India's worst outbreak of the avian flu.

'We started the culling operation in the morning. Around 65 rapid response teams, each comprising three to four personnel, have left for the two affected areas to cull around 50,000 poultry birds,' Murshidabad District Magistrate Subir Bhadra told IANS Monday.

West Bengal Animal Resource Minister Anisur Rahman said a detailed map of the affected area was being prepared to ensure a foolproof culling operation.

Tests at Bhopal's High Security Animal Disease Laboratory (HSADL) have confirmed the presence of bird flu virus in samples from Nayamukundapur in Raghunathgunj Block II and Dohapara village in Murshidabad-Jiagunj block of the district.

The two areas witnessed death of nearly 1,000 birds in the past 10 days. Rahman earlier told IANS that the new cases might be due to the fact that villagers had hidden ducks and chickens during the previous culling operation.

'The virus could have been transmitted though smuggling of poultry birds from bordering Bangladesh, which is hit by avian flu again. The areas from where the reports came are not new areas,' he said.

According to Rahman, about four million birds were culled by mid-February since the bird flu outbreak was confirmed Jan 15.

The authorities in Murshidabad Sunday used loudspeakers to warn villagers to stay away from backyard poultry and to cooperate with culling teams.

In early February, the authorities had hoped that India's worst bird flu crisis was over. The ban on sale and consumption of poultry products was also lifted from 13 of the 19 West Bengal districts where the bird flu had raged.

The state government had then allayed fears of human infection, after the blood samples of the 19 people sent for testing were negative.

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