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REPORT SAYS GLOBAL POULTRY INDUSTRY IS THE ROOT OF THE BIRD FLU CRISIS

Small-scale poultry farming and wild birds are being unfairly blamed for the bird flu crisis now affecting large parts of the world. A new report from GRAIN shows how the transnational poultry industry is the root of the problem and must be the focus of efforts to control the virus. [1]

The spread of industrial poultry production and trade networks has created ideal conditions for the emergence and transmission of lethal viruses like the H5N1 strain of bird flu. Once inside densely populated factory farms, viruses can rapidly become lethal and amplify. Air thick with viral load from infected farms is carried for kilometres, while integrated trade networks spread the disease through many carriers: live birds, day-old-chicks, meat, feathers, hatching eggs, eggs, chicken manure and animal feed. [2]

"Everyone is focused on migratory birds and backyard chickens as the problem," says Devlin Kuyek of GRAIN. "But they are not effective vectors of highly pathogenic bird flu. The virus kills them, but is unlikely to be spread by them."

For example, in Malaysia, the mortality rate from H5N1 among village chicken is only 5%, indicating that the virus has a hard time spreading among small scale chicken flocks. H5N1 outbreaks in Laos, which is surrounded by infected countries, have only occurred in the nation's few factory farms, which are supplied by Thai hatcheries. The only cases of bird flu in backyard poultry, which account for over 90% of Laos' production, occurred next to the factory farms.

"The evidence we see over and over again, from the Netherlands in 2003 to Japan in 2004 to Egypt in 2006, is that lethal bird flu breaks out in large scale industrial chicken farms and then spreads," Kuyek explains.

The Nigerian outbreak earlier this year began at a single factory farm, owned by a Cabinet minister, distant from hotspots for migratory birds but known for importing unregulated hatchable eggs. In India, local authorities say that H5N1 emerged and spread from a factory farm owned by the country's largest poultry company, Venkateshwara Hatcheries.

A burning question is why governments and international agencies, like the

UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, are doing nothing to investigate how the factory farms and their byproducts, such as animal feed and manure, spread the virus. Instead, they are using the crisis as an opportunity to further industrialise the poultry sector. Initiatives are multiplying to ban outdoor poultry, squeeze out small producers and restock farms with genetically-modified chickens. The web of complicity with an industry engaged in a string of denials and cover-ups seems complete.

"Farmers are losing their livelihoods, native chickens are being wiped out and some experts say that we're on the verge of a human pandemic that could kill millions of people," Kuyek concludes. "When will governments realise that to protect poultry and people from bird flu, we need to protect them from the global poultry industry?"

[1] The full briefing, "Fowl play: The poultry industry's central role in the bird flu crisis", is available at <http://www.grain.org/go/birdflu>. Spanish and French translations will be posted shortly.

[2] Chicken faeces and bedding from poultry factory floors are common ingredients in animal feed.

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GRAIN is an international non-governmental organisation (NGO) which promotes the sustainable management and use of agricultural biodiversity based on people's control over genetic resources and local knowledge.

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