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Wild-bird smugglers pose avian-flu threat

by Prime Sarmiento

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Our latest release is a two-part series on bird flu in the Philippines. So far, the country has remained free from the avian-influenza virus and its deadly H5N1 strain, which can affect humans. But, as this series shows, the Philippines is vulnerable to a bird-flu outbreak.

The first part of the series says that the failure of authorities to halt bird smuggling — despite years of arrests and confiscations and laws and policies meant to stem the illegal trading of endangered birds — is the Achilles heel of the anti-bird flu campaign. Authorities fear that infected smuggled birds could affect local fowl.

THE USUALLY frenzied Recto district in downtown Manila slows down on Sundays, as schools and most shops take a day off. At the Arranque market, however, Sunday is as busy as any other day of the week. Home to numerous pet shops, Arranque is astir seven days a week as buyers and sellers haggle amid cages containing yelping puppies, hamsters running inside their plastic play wheels, and parrots cloaked in a rainbow of feathers that seem as soft as felt.

This writer and an elderly companion were there one recent Sunday, ostensibly looking for a pet bird. After inspecting several pairs of cockatiels, this writer's companion announced she was bored with the "ordinary" birds and expressed interest in cockatoos imported from Indonesia.

She told the seller she had heard these cockatoos were "prettier" and had brighter colored feathers, and indicated she was willing to pay a hefty amount for one. This was untrue, but the "show" was intended as a "test." Sure enough, a "result" emerged just a few minutes later, in the form of a middle-aged man who said he had a contact who could deliver such a bird in exchange for a cool P20,000.

This is the kind of story that frustrates Mundita Lim, assistant director at the Protected Areas and Wildlife Bureau (PAWB), the agency mandated to protect wildlife resources. In recent years, the PAWB has intensified its efforts in part because some of the smuggled birds, such as the salmon-crested cockatoos and chattering lorries, are endangered varieties.

But these days, the specter of bird flu has made the PAWB all the more anxious to stop wild-bird smuggling.

"*Ang tigas-tigas ng ulo* (They are really hardheaded)!" an exasperated Lim says of the wild-bird smugglers. "I've said, if they're not afraid of the law, they should be afraid of bird flu."

Two-part PCIJ report on avian flu:

- [Wild-bird smugglers pose avian-flu threat \(/stories/wild-bird-smugglers-pose-avian-flu-threat/\)](/stories/wild-bird-smugglers-pose-avian-flu-threat/)
- [Duck breeders and cock raisers resist anti-bird flu measures \(/stories/duck-breeders-and-cock-raisers-resist-anti-bird-flu-measures/\)](/stories/duck-breeders-and-cock-raisers-resist-anti-bird-flu-measures/)

So far, the Philippines has remained bird flu-free even as nearby countries such as Indonesia — where most of the smuggled birds come from — Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam have reported cases of the illness's deadly H5N1 strain, which can infect even humans.

For sure the government has set up measures to keep bird flu out of the country. But the failure of authorities to halt bird smuggling — despite years of arrests and confiscations and the many laws and policies meant to stem the illegal trading of endangered birds — points to the Achilles heel of the anti-bird flu campaign: weak, if not absent, compliance with laws and rules.

Bird smuggling is not the only problem confronting the National Avian Influenza Task Force (NAITF) formed by the health and agriculture departments in April 2005. There's also the problem of convincing duck raisers to stop grazing their fowl in wetland areas frequented by migratory birds. Authorities are also unsure if fighting-cock aficionados would agree to cull prized birds should avian flu break out in their areas.

Carolyn Benigno, animal health officer for Asia and the Pacific for the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), has already noted that unless there is a "strong surveillance component," it would be difficult for the government to prevent and curb the spread of the disease despite the many measures in place.

So far, sheer luck and the fact that the Philippines doesn't share land borders with its Asian neighbors are the only things that have kept bird flu out of the country. The virus is usually spread through the movement and trade of poultry; the zoonotic H5N1 strain can be transmitted through direct contact with infected poultry or surfaces containing its feces.

But it is also the country's archipelagic nature, along with its long coastline, numerous ports and poor border controls, which have made it a magnet for wild-bird smugglers. These lax controls make the country vulnerable to bird flu. In Indonesia, the smugglers' favorite source for birds, H5N1 has already killed 22 people.

Even before bird flu, the PAWB's Lim says, her agency and nongovernmental organizations were already at their wits' end trying to stop the illicit trade. RA 9147 or the Wildlife Resources Conservation and Protection Act penalizes the illegal trade in wildlife (not just birds, but other endangered flora and fauna as well). It metes out a maximum penalty of six years in jail and a fine of P1 million, but these have apparently not daunted smugglers. The country has also signed the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.

Rolando Dy, executive director of the Center for Food and Agribusiness at the University of Asia and the Pacific, says a bird-flu outbreak could mean a potential three-percent loss in the country's GDP. But his estimate includes only the poultry sector — a P100-billion industry dominated by large-scale commercial poultry raisers. Excluded are industries that rely on chicken-meat production, such as animal-feeds suppliers, processed-meat manufacturers, and hotels and restaurants, including the fast-food industry.

"The local fast-food sector is fueled by the poultry industry," says Dy, referring to the Filipinos' predilection for crispy fried chicken dipped in gravy. He adds that the average Filipino consumes about seven kilograms of chicken meat and 50 eggs per year. "Imagine, Pinoys would no longer have any chicken to feast on!"

More importantly, Dy's calculations exclude healthcare costs and manpower losses should there be a serious H5N1 outbreak among humans. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the H5N1 strain has infected 186 people since December 2003, when the current worldwide outbreak began in South Korea. As of last Mar. 24, the fatality count was at 105, or some 56 percent of the total number of cases.

The first confirmed H5N1 outbreak was detected in Scotland in 1959. Since then, 24 outbreaks have been recorded worldwide. In 1997, the first recorded instance of human infection by H5N1 happened in Hong Kong. The virus infected 18 people, six of whom died. In early 2003, H5N1 infected two members of a Hong Kong family that had traveled to southern China; one of them died.

The present bird-flu outbreak — the largest in terms of geographical scale and number of cases of severe infections among humans — has been ongoing for more than two years. From South Korea, it spread to China, India and other Asian countries. Since late 2006, bird-flu cases have been recorded in Europe and Africa. Farmers and agriculture officials in several countries have killed millions of ducks and chickens to curtail the rapid spread of the virus.

The bird-flu outbreak is a pressing international concern owing to the huge social and economic burden that it brought to Asia, the region hit hardest by the virus. It has crimped the growth of Asian poultry industries, raised global chicken-meat prices and hurt the livelihood of thousands of Asians who rely on poultry production.

Milan Brahmbhatt, the World Bank's lead economist for East Asia and the Pacific, has noted that it was the small backyard farmers who suffered most from the bird-flu outbreak in Vietnam. "The impact has been felt by individual rural households, and has only partly been offset by government compensation to farmers," he said in late 2005.

In Thailand and Indonesia, where most poultry producers are large-scale commercial agribusiness firms, the "impact may be felt in greater unemployment of wage laborers, lost profits and corporate bankruptcies," Brahmbhatt said.

In its study on the impact of bird-flu outbreak on the international meat trade, the FAO reported that the outbreak led to a shortage of poultry meat (as major chicken-meat suppliers Thailand and China were banned from exporting these) and an increase in world poultry prices.

There is also the danger that the current outbreaks will evolve into a pandemic or a widespread human-to-human transmission of the virus. The WHO is gravely concerned about a possible pandemic, as most countries are not prepared to cope with one.

"Current production capacity — estimated at around 300 million doses of trivalent seasonal vaccine per year — falls far below the demand that will arise during a pandemic," says the WHO.

All these prompted the Philippine government and the private sector to implement various measures to maintain the country's bird flu-free status. The NAITF has already prepared the Avian Influenza Protection Program (AIPP), which includes a comprehensive list of measures aimed at preventing the virus from entering the country. It also details how to keep the virus from spreading among poultry if there is an initial bird-flu outbreak and how to prevent and control avian influenza in humans.

The NAITF, through its information and education arm popularly known as Project Blue, is also mounting several media campaigns and workshops to inform poultry raisers, farmers, local government officials, and other concerned stakeholders about AIPP.

The focus is on prevention, says Bureau of Animal Industry Director Davinio Catbagan, stressing that "the risk is there as long as there's bird flu in other countries."

Ruben Pascual, Project Blue's overall coordinator, says the AIPP has two measures that specifically address the problem of wild-bird smuggling: one bans the importation of all live domestic and wild poultry, wild birds and poultry products from avian influenza-affected countries, while the other emphasizes the enforcement of RA 9147.

In accordance with procedures set in the AIPP, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) last December issued a memorandum suspending the issuance of wildlife import permits for all cage and pet wild birds. Then DENR Secretary Michael Defensor also ordered the PAWB and the DENR regional offices to instruct their wildlife monitoring personnel assigned at airports and seaports to be more "vigilant" in preventing the illegal entry and trade of wild birds. Defensor added that "tighter surveillance" must be enforced on birds coming from Indonesia and other bird flu-infected countries.

Data collated by Haribon Foundation, a local NGO that campaigns against wildlife smuggling, show that around 300 cockatoos and lorries are illegally brought into the country each year. Haribon says that Filipino smugglers can purchase the birds through barter, exchanging roosters, hybrid swine, wine and even pots for the exotic fowl. Law enforcers in both the Philippines and Indonesia sometimes connive with smugglers, says Haribon.

Hidden in cargo boats and fishing vessels and kept in bottles or carton boxes, smuggled birds are usually tranquilized so they would not make any noise. They are shipped through the southern backdoor and often end up in pet shops in Mindanao and Metro Manila.

Blas Troy Tabaranza Jr., Haribon's operations group director, says his organization has coordinated with PAWB, the coast guards and other concerned agencies in both the Philippines and Indonesia in enforcing strict border controls, raiding several pet shops that sell smuggled birds and confiscating birds brought in by smugglers. These efforts initially discouraged smuggling, with a study released by Haribon in 2002 revealing that the volume and frequency of the illegal wild-bird trade "have diminished through the years due perhaps to stricter implementation of laws both in Indonesia and the Philippines."

Tabaranza, however, says that the lack of follow up, funding and personnel have hampered these efforts. In fact, the raids seem to have only driven the trade further underground.

Pet-shop owners in Arranque and Cartimar in Pasay admit that the raids conducted by PAWB have just made them more cautious. They may have stopped displaying exotic birds in their shops, they say, but they haven't stopped procuring smuggled birds. Private bird collectors with cash and contacts can still order exotic birds and have these home-delivered.

But the Philippines is just one link in the illegal global trade in wildlife, which is believed to be controlled by organized crime syndicates. Industry experts say the booming Chinese economy has pushed up demand for exotic flora and fauna, which are used for traditional medicine and aphrodisiacs.

The bird flu threat, however, is putting more pressure on the government to at least minimize bird smuggling. Echoing other environmentalists and frustrated government authorities like Lim, Tabaranza asserts, "The important thing is, we shouldn't allow the bird flu virus to come here. We should stop it at the port of entry."

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