

Bird flu breaks out in Uganda

Confirmation. Mr Ssempiija says specimens taken from white-winged tern birds that died en masse on Lake Victoria shores in Lutembe, Wakiso District, have turned positive to the deadly disease.

BY ANDREW BAGALA
abagala@ug.nationmedia.com

KAMPALA. The government yesterday activated its emergency plan for epidemics control after confirming the first-ever outbreak of the deadly Avian Influenza or Avian flu (H5N1) in the country following multiple tests at both agricultural and human health laboratories.

Mr Vincent Ssempiija, the Agriculture minister, said specimens taken from white-winged tern birds that died en masse on Lake Victoria shores in Lutembe, Wakiso District, "unfortunately have turned positive to the very serious disease; the Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI)".

This strain of the disease, one of three types, affects humans, animals and birds, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO).

The global health agency, in briefing notes on its website about the epidemic, notes that avian influenza or bird flu is an "infectious disease of birds caused by type A strains of the influenza virus". It can transmit to human beings, causing severe respiratory infections.

Humans contract the disease through close contact with infected poultry or with objects contaminated by their faecal matter, according to the global health agency.

Health ministry Permanent Secretary, Dr Diana Atwine, told this newspaper last night that there had been "massive deaths of migratory birds at Lutembe beach" due to avian flu, and ad-



Admits. Health ministry Permanent Secretary Dr Diana Atwine. COURTESY PHOTO

ditional cases were detected 10 days later in ducks and chicken in Masaka District.

"There is a danger, although it isn't a big risk, that if the disease crosses to human beings, it will give us a big headache," she said.

Experts from Health ministry headquarters are due to visit the affected areas to assess the extent and impact of the outbreak and implement plans to contain spread.

The PS said a multi-sectoral taskforce previously constituted under the Office of the Prime Minister has been reactivated to lead emergency response, including sensitising affected communities to avoid

physical contact with or consuming sick or dead birds.

"We have a comprehensive plan to deal with all epidemics, including Avian Flu. There was already a committee which was set up under the Office of the Prime Minister, which has been redundant and it has been reactivated for this purpose."

DR DIANA ATWINE, HEALTH MINISTRY PERMANENT SECRETARY

News of the avian flu outbreak is a heart-break for poultry farmers, already reeling with losses from shrunken markets for poultry products

following renewed violence in South Sudan.

Mr Robert Sserwanga, a member of the Association of Uganda Poultry Industry, said "the disease is in a central region which has over nine million commercial birds. An outbreak of a viral disease means massive depopulation of birds".

The dilemma, he said, is of framers panicking and failing to distinguish between common poultry diseases such as New Castle that present with symptoms similar to that of Avian Influenza.

Fishermen first observed the deaths of birds at Lutembe beaches in Entebbe on January 2, 2017 before new cases were reported in Masaka District.

"We have a comprehensive plan to deal with all epidemics, including Avian Flu. There was already a committee which was set up under the Office of the Prime Minister, which has been redundant and it has been reactivated for this purpose," said PS Atwine as she sought to calm fears.

The government is already mulling imposing quarantine on livestock and poultry in the affected areas to stem the risk of the disease.

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