

An international security expert, Dr Alan Dupont of the Lowy Institute, has warned that air travel would virtually cease and some sectors of the hospitality and transport sectors of the Australian economy would collapse if a bird flu pandemic struck on Australian soil but have we learnt anything from the SARS outbreak?

Bird flu — SARS lessons remembered by some, but not all as the risk grows

THE THREAT of looming bird flu following the SARS outbreak two years ago may be of vital interest to business travellers, but unfortunately, there's no standard global government response available to date.

While Asian countries are using containment strategies, the EU position seems to be based on the gamble that avian flu will not spread.

As a result, travellers may well find they need to adopt their own protection strategy if flying into potentially hazardous destinations.

The risk is well known in Asia-Pacific, but in July, the discovery of avian influenza among migratory birds and domestic poultry in Siberia triggered fears that the virus may reach Western Europe.

Despite warnings by many scientists that bird flu could mutate and cause a global pandemic, sharp divisions emerged among European Union (EU) member states over whether to take action to stem the spread of the virus.

And even sharper divisions emerged among 'experts' when asked to estimate the number of potential victims. Figures in Europe have ranged from 7.5m to 150m.

During April, 6,000 dead birds infected with H5N1 avian flu, were found on Lake Qinghai in Western China.

From there, the virus spread to Tibet, to western Mongolia and to chickens and wild fowl near the Siberian capital of Novosibirsk. There have also been recent outbreaks in the last several months in Japan and South Korea.

If the virus continues to spread, then there is a possibility that birds migrating



from European Russia could spread avian flu to free-range poultry in Western Europe.

The United Nations said that it could kill as many as 150 million people if the world fails to prepare for an expected mutation in the virus, which would enable it to easily spread from human to human.

The Dutch government has taken immediate precautions after the Novosibirsk outbreak.

Dutch farmers were instructed to keep free-range birds under cover, to protect domestic poultry from contact with wild birds infected by the virus.

German farmers were told to do the same.

Elsewhere in Europe, government responses were not as fast.

The Dutch policy also was sharply opposed by other EU members, particularly the French and British governments. The divisions are so deep that the EU executive announced that its lawyers are investigating if the Netherlands government has broken EU laws by taking unilateral action.

Meanwhile, some of Taiwan's top technology firms are taking precautions against bird flu in case the virus threatens operations.

Taking a page from the measures adopted against the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003, BenQ Corporation is advising its China employees to avoid crowded places and watch hygiene.

"Employees come in contact with many people so we are telling them to be careful. If they feel sick, they should see a doctor quickly," a spokesman said.

Microchip maker Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. (TSMC) has set up a committee that will act as a command centre in case of a bird flu outbreak.

Lite-On Technology Corp, a top manufacturer of computer peripherals, said executives were discussing bird flu at meetings and preparing to issue a letter to employees, though the company had not decided on a course of action.

At press time, Britain had begun bans on bird shows.