Highly pathogenic avian influenza A(H5N8) viruses of clade 2.3.4.4 spread into West Africa in late 2016 during the autumn bird migration. Genetic characterization of the complete genome of these viruses detected in wild and domestic birds in Cameroon in January 2017 demonstrated the occurrence of multiple virus introductions.

Since the first detection in China in 1996, highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) viruses of the H5 subtype descendent of the H5N1 virus A/goose/Guangdong/1/1996 (Gs/GD/96) have evolved into multiple genetic clades (1,2) that have been threatening poultry worldwide. Since 2010, clade 2.3.4 has demonstrated an unusual propensity to replace its N1 subtype and acquire different neuraminidase (NA) genes from unrelated avian influenza viruses through reassortment, which has resulted in the emergence of new viral subtypes within the Gs/GD/96 H5 lineage (e.g., N2, N5, N6, N8). In late spring 2016, reassortant HPAI A(H5N8) clade 2.3.4.4 (group B) virus was detected in migratory wild birds in Qinghai Lake, China (3), and in the salt lake system of Uvs Nuur, on the border between Mongolia and the Russian Federation (4). Since then, this newly emerged virus has caused multiple outbreaks of the disease in poultry and wild birds across Europe, Asia, and the Middle East and has extended not only to countries in northern, central, and western Africa, as did the previous Gs/GD/96 H5 lineage outbreaks, but also to the eastern and southern parts of Africa (5). We investigated the epidemiology of the outbreaks in early 2017 of HPAI H5N8 virus in domestic and wild birds in Cameroon and determined the possible origin of this virus through whole-genome analyses.

The Study
On January 2, 2017, high death rates were reported in Indian peafowl (Pavo cristatus) in a backyard exotic poultry farm located in the town of Makilingaye (Tokombéré district of Mayo-Sava division), a village neighboring Nigeria in the far-north region of Cameroon. Samples were collected by the Cameroon Epidemic Surveillance Network (Reseau d’Epidemie-Surveillance au Cameroun [RESCAM]) of the Ministry of Livestock, Fisheries and Animal Industries and were sent to the National Veterinary Laboratory (LANAVET) in Garoua, where the H5N8 subtype was diagnosed. Almost all the peafowl (103/107) died within ≈2 weeks. Death in chickens (Gallus gallus domesticus, 24/24) housed in the same compound was delayed and appeared 5 days later than in peafowl. Following the laboratory confirmation of the first outbreak, the Cameroon government, through the Ministry of Livestock, Fisheries, and Animal Industries, implemented prompt and strong control measures to stop the spread of the virus and reduce the risk of human infections. Stamp-out was deployed together with movement restrictions and virological surveillance; disinfection of premises and contact materials was intensified. The RESCAM team conducted a routine avian influenza survey in the Maroua, Yagoua, and Guidiguis central poultry markets in the far-north region. All the samples were analyzed at LANAVET Garoua and Annex Yaoundé; H5N8 virus was detected in 5 birds (1 pigeon, 1 chicken, 2 guinea fowls, and 1 duck) out of 122 birds.

We sequenced the hemagglutinin (HA) and NA gene segments of the virus A/Indian peafowl/Cameroun/17RS1661-6/2017, identified from an Indian peafowl in Makilingaye, at the Istituto Zooprofiliattico Sperimentale delle Venezie, Padova, Italy (B. Zecchin, A. Fusaro, A. Bianco, A. Salomoni, G. Zamperin, I. Monne); Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome, Italy (L. Wiersma); Animal Production and Health Laboratory, Seibersdorf, Austria (G. Cattoli)

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a wild pigeon, all identified in the Maroua and Yagoua markets (Table). A detailed description of the methods used for sequencing and genetic analyses is provided in online Technical Appendix 1 (https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/EID/article/24/7/17-2120-Techapp1.pdf) and details on the HA gene segments used for the analysis are given in Technical Appendix 2 (https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/EID/article/24/7/17-2120-Techapp2.xlsx). We submitted consensus sequences to GenBank (accession nos. MG650618–41).

Topology of the phylogenetic tree based on the HA gene segment showed that the 4 H5N8 viruses detected in Cameroon in 2017 fell within genetic clade 2.3.4.4 group.
cannot be excluded. The region contains several wetlands close to the Nigerian border. Considering the extensive and porous frontier between Cameroon and Nigeria, trade and introductions into Africa may have occurred almost simultaneously during March–December 2016 (online Technical Appendix 1 Figure 9). However, analyses of the amino acid sequences show that A/duck/Cameroon/17RS1661-3/2017 possesses the N319K mutation in the NP protein, which has been reported to enhance polymerase activity and stimulate vRNA synthesis in mammalian cells (6). In addition, A/chicken/Cameroon/17RS1661-1/2017 contains the V100A mutation in the PA protein, which is an amino acid signature typical of human influenza viruses (7).

Conclusions

Nigeria was the first country in West Africa to report the presence of the HPAI H5N8 virus in November 2016 (8,9). Less than 2 months later, in January 2017, the virus was detected in the far-north region of Cameroon in Makilingaye, close to the Nigerian border. Considering the extensive and porous frontier between Cameroon and Nigeria, trade and movement of poultry might have played a key role in the spread of the virus. However, the involvement of wild birds cannot be excluded. The region contains several wetlands (Domayo River, Mayo Kani River, and Maga Lake) where different wild birds congregate, in particular during the dry season (December–April), when the virus was first detected. The almost simultaneous detection (early January 2017) of the H5N8 virus in poultry and wild birds in distant locations in Africa, such as Tunisia and Uganda, suggests that the role of wild birds in the introduction and/or dissemination of the virus in the region should not be overlooked. Of note, the first outbreak caused by the Gs/GD/96 H5 lineage in Cameroon, in 2006, also occurred in the far-north region of Cameroon at about the same time. This finding might suggest a common pathway for introduction of the virus into this area and highlights the need to improve surveillance in this region.

Although the epidemiologic and genetic data are insufficient to establish definite pathways and time of introduction of H5N8 virus into West Africa, this study demonstrates that ≥2 distinct H5N8 viruses entered Cameroon. This finding, together with the evidence that this event represents the third incursion of a Gs/GD/96-lineage H5 HPAI virus into Cameroon, again underlines the need to perform avian influenza surveillance on an ongoing basis for rapid identification and response to outbreaks in this area.

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