

31 August 2006

Indonesia's shift on bird flu a step in the right direction

The Indonesian government's recent decision to refocus its strategy in the fight against avian flu, by putting the emphasis on public awareness, disease surveillance and animal control measures, is an opportunity to reverse the situation in the country, says the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

The announcement of the shift in tactics came during an international donor conference held in the Indonesian capital from 23-24 August.

"This is the way ahead. If we do not focus on containing the disease at source, that is in the animals, we can expect to see continuing human cases. We're a long way behind the game and it will take huge resources and strong commitment from all concerned," said John Weaver, FAO's senior technical advisor on avian influenza in Indonesia.

Indonesia is the world's worst hit country in the current series of avian flu outbreaks. According to the National Committee for Avian Influenza Control and Pandemic Influenza Preparedness (Komnas FBPI), avian influenza is endemic in animals in 29 of Indonesia's 33 provinces and, so far, the country has registered 62 human cases, 47 of whom have died.

The head of the committee, Bayu Krisnamurthi, told the press: "We have been learning from our experience in combating avian influenza since 2003. All of our prevention programmes are important, but the focus is to control the disease at its source, that is, in the agricultural sector. Here the objective is to prevent the avian influenza from spreading and mutating."

The refocused strategy places a particular emphasis on risk communication, information dissemination and public awareness. Community awareness is the key to determining the effectiveness of avian influenza control. "Indonesia is home to millions of 'backyard farmers' who raise free-range poultry," noted Krisnamurthi. "This is an extremely difficult sector to control. Public understanding and awareness of the disease is a key element to combating the virus."

"The messages have to be clear, simple and down to earth, touching the daily lives of the communities," said Krisnamurthi.

The government plans to launch a national public awareness campaign before Ramadan in September, telling Indonesians about simple, effective steps they can take to reduce the risk of contracting bird flu.

Disease surveillance, which has been identified as the area with second highest priority, is a development in progress. With technical assistance from FAO, the government is currently developing participatory disease surveillance (PDS) and participatory disease response (PDR) teams to carry out proactive epidemiological surveillance at the district level.

PDS/PDR started as a pilot project in 12 districts in Java in the beginning of 2006, and currently has teams established in 51 districts in the three islands of Java, Bali and Sumatra.

The refocused strategy also calls for controlling the disease at its source in animals through vaccination, culling and compensation for bird owners, and bio-security measures.

The donor conference identified major funding gaps faced by Indonesia. The government estimates total country requirements at 813 million US dollars to control avian flu over the next three years.

However, it has allocated just 46 million US dollars for 2007, 10 million US dollars less than that earmarked for 2006, while international donors have pledged 47 million US dollars, most of which would be channeled through international agencies such as FAO, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the U.N. Children Fund (UNICEF). Krisnamurthi called on donors to help fill the massive remaining gap.

Komnas FBPI noted that no international donor funds currently support vaccination or culling and compensation programmes, both high priorities in the country's fight against bird flu.

"Compensation is the key to unlocking early detection and reporting," Weaver stressed.

The news of the change in Indonesian bird flu strategy comes on the heels of the announcement earlier this month that it had made an about-turn in its policy of reluctance to share genetic data on H5N1 bird flu viruses and would now deposit this data in GenBank, a public database of genetic sequences.

Peter Roeder, an animal health officer for FAO in Indonesia, greeted the news, saying that since August 2005 Indonesia had not shared many, if any, bird flu virus samples with others. He noted that it was only very recently that 91 samples were sent to the OIE laboratory in Geelong, Australia.

Indonesia's move came August 3, just two days after the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) pledged to "systematically" publish avian flu virus sequences and urged others to follow suit.

Together with the August 25 news of the setting up of the Global Initiative on Sharing Avian Influenza Data (GISAID) by 70 scientists and health officials and the news that the Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has released the genetic sequences of 650 flu virus genes into an open database, these announcements raise the prospect of better tracking of mutations in the virus, which should help in the development of vaccines to use in case the H5N1 virus evolves into a strain capable of causing a human pandemic.