



Sumatra: FAO investigating possible animal causes behind human cases of bird flu

25 May 2006 - While not ruling out the possibility of human-to-human transmission in the case of seven close family members who have died from avian flu in a Sumatran village, the World Health Organisation (WHO) said this week that the search for a possible alternative source of exposure is continuing.

From the outset, FAO has been working closely with the national and local government veterinary services to investigate the animal health environment which could possibly have contributed to the outbreak.

Teams from the Ministry of Agriculture veterinary service, FAO veterinarians, staff from local government veterinary services and the ministry's research laboratory at Bogor, have conducted field investigations which so far have not identified avian flu disease in animals in the vicinity of the outbreak.

All laboratory examinations of samples - mainly from chickens, ducks, swine and manure - have failed to detect the virus. Antibodies in a low proportion of chickens and ducks could be consistent with known earlier circulation of the avian flu virus in northern Sumatra in late 2005 and early 2006. On the other hand, they could have resulted from vaccination.

An announcement that some swine from a nearby village had tested positive for avian flu antibodies raised concern because this would have represented a new development in the spread of the disease, opening up the possibility of mammal to mammal transmission. However, all available evidence suggests that swine play no role in the transmission of the current strain of H5N1 avian flu virus.

Swine sera are difficult to examine and results need to be confirmed by additional tests in a reference laboratory that carries out validated tests for influenza antibodies in swine. Serum samples should soon be received by the Veterinary Laboratory Agency in Britain for a range of comparative tests. When these results are available a definitive statement will be possible.

For the time being, there is no reason to suspect that the H5N1 avian flu virus concerned spreads between people more easily than before or that it could sustain a human infection cycle.