



FAO: Guardian against the animal disease threat to humans

More generous support needed to protect animal and public health

Rome, 31 May 2006 - The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), along with its sister specialised agency the World Health Organisation (WHO), is right in the forefront of the world's struggle to try to minimise the threats posed by H5N1 avian influenza and other animal diseases that can affect humans

Speaking during a one-day visit to Rome, David Nabarro, U.N. System Influenza Coordinator, praised the work of FAO and said that from his privileged position as an observer of international and national, and official and voluntary efforts to combat avian flu, FAO staff working on the disease "are fundamental guardians against the problems that can be caused by zoonoses", or diseases that can pass from animals to humans.

Calling on the donor community to provide generous support to the efforts to control and eradicate the highly dangerous H5N1 avian influenza virus currently affecting over 50 countries worldwide, Nabarro said too little is being spent on global animal and public health given the threat posed by diseases such as influenza.

"We invest billions in defending ourselves against organised violence or sometimes even individual acts of vandalism and anti-social behaviour. We spend millions in preparing ourselves for natural disasters and even climate change. We spend virtually nothing overall in proper animal health and biosecurity services."

"The informed public," he continued, "knows that the world's defences against diseases that come into the human race from the animal kingdom are really very weak indeed."

That is why international bodies such as FAO and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) are important because they are involved in setting standards, monitoring the extent to which these standards are achieved and then providing assistance to countries to bring their animal health services and biosecurity up to the required standards.

"FAO's inputs are unique," said Nabarro. "It provides technical advice on how standards should be fulfilled, support to laboratories, assistance with the implementation of vaccination and other programmes, and then sometimes actual direct hands-on provision of services in countries that really lack capacity. Without the FAO doing this, we would not be able to fight this battle successfully."

The U.N. Coordinator noted that because the H5N1 virus does not stay inside national boundaries, there is a need for an international body, and "because the H5N1 virus needs science to defeat it, you need a science-based international body."

"H5N1 means the engagement of all the countries of the world through political machinery to deal with avian influenza." FAO as a member state organisation governed by its member states is well-placed for this task.

The main challenge at the moment, said Nabarro, is to bring H5N1 avian flu more under control in the bird populations of the world. However, "because the virus can be moved asymptotically (neither causing nor showing signs of disease) in certain birds - some ducks, some migrating wildfowl - we're in a situation where the continuous control of H5N1, and indeed the eradication of the virus, cannot be contemplated as an absolute outcome."

"We've got to be prepared for the possibility of re-introduction of H5N1 into poultry populations anywhere in the world at any time, and we've got to be prepared for that as long as the virus is circulating somewhere in wild birds or in commercial and domestic poultry."

Nabarro believes that the world is going to have to live with the threats posed by H5N1 for the foreseeable future. "This world is going to have to have defences against H5N1 slipping into the human



population. It's going to have to have defences against H5N1 expanding into new animal populations and it's going to have to have defences against H5N1 becoming the next human influenza pandemic."

On a positive note, he dismissed the idea that any single species of bird might face extinction as a result of avian flu, arguing that there are a number of very good and very well tested forms of intervention, including those practised by FAO, that are already helping minimise the threat of the disease for domestic, backyard and commercial poultry.

"We're seeing opportunities for poultry production certainly in the commercial sector but also in the backyard to be maintained in a way that's not associated with a continuous risk of H5N1 infection, at least not at a high level." As a result, he continued, "not only will the poultry industry continue for some years to come, many years to come, but we will continue to depend on chicken and other forms of poultry as a major source of nutrition."