

Second FAO/OIE Regional Meeting on Avian Influenza Control in Asia, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam, 23-25 Feb. 2005

FAO Address / Opening Session

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Honourable Minister Cao Duc Phat,
Chairman of the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City,
Distinguished country delegates,
Representatives of international and regional organizations,
Representatives of donor countries and agencies,
Ladies and gentlemen.

It is my pleasure to present these opening comments on behalf of Dr Jacques Diouf, Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. On behalf of FAO, I welcome you to the second FAO/OIE Regional Conference on Avian Influenza in Asia. I would like to acknowledge the kindness of our host, the Government of Viet Nam, specifically the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, for allowing us to hold the meeting in Ho Chi Minh City.

I am particularly pleased to see among the distinguished delegates many veterinarians and other scientists who are actively involved in fighting avian influenza in infected countries. Disease control and prevention are among our highest priority activities, as public sector officials and scientists. It is a testimony to the seriousness of the avian influenza situation to see such high calibre scientific expertise gathered in Ho Chi Minh City and I am very pleased to be here with you today.

Avian Influenza has had great economic and social impact on affected countries and the disease situation could, in the worst case, lead to a new global human influenza pandemic. FAO has recognized the seriousness of this situation and has focused its respective leadership and coordination efforts in the Emergency Centre for Control of Transboundary Animal Diseases (ECTAD), under the direction of Dr Joseph Domenech, Chief Veterinary Officer of FAO. In partnership with other international organizations, the World Animal Health Organization (OIE) and the World Health Organization (WHO), FAO has been working closely with affected countries, regional organizations, the international community and donors, to help manage this serious problem.

It is in the interest of both developed and developing countries to invest in the control and containment of avian influenza. Our objective is to protect human health - locally and internationally - and to promote food security - and our strategy is to control the disease at source. This means addressing the transmission of the virus where the disease occurs, in poultry, specifically free range chickens and wetland dwelling ducks, and thus curbing disease occurrence in the region before it spreads to other parts of the world. There is an increasing risk of avian influenza spread that no poultry keeping country can afford to ignore.

We must assume that avian influenza will persist for many years in some of the countries that had disease outbreaks in 2004-2005. The presence of these adaptable viruses in reservoirs such as farmed ducks, wild birds and live bird markets, means that avian influenza elimination must be addressed as a long term goal. In the immediate and short term, the objective, then, is to push infection back into known reservoirs and minimise the risk of infection spilling over into farmed poultry and humans in villages and farms. Minimising poultry infection and keeping humans free of avian influenza will

help to prevent a global influenza pandemic.

In the long term, FAO and its partners will continue working with affected countries to eliminate infection from as many production systems as possible, using the established, proven tools, and also embracing new technologies and approaches, based on the relevant scientific research and development efforts. Developed and developing countries must work in partnership to find answers to the key questions on the detection, control and elimination of avian influenza.

It is known that wild birds, particularly ducks, are a reservoir of avian influenza viruses and that it will not be possible to completely eliminate this source of infection. However, current evidence suggests that trade in live poultry, mixing of avian species on farms and live bird markets, and poor biosecurity in poultry production units contribute much more to disease spread than wild bird movements. FAO calls on the international community to support the conduct of research so that the understanding of how wild birds contribute to the epidemiology of avian influenza in the field can be improved. FAO advises against the destruction of wild birds and their habitats as such practice is unlikely to contribute significantly to disease control and is inappropriate from a wildlife conservation viewpoint.

There is a complex relationship between human behaviour and poultry production and marketing systems. We continue to hear tragic reports of human illness and death arising as a result of risky practices. Public awareness of disease risks must be raised and some traditional practices changed to prevent further cases of human infection.

The production of poultry and other livestock is continually increasing in Asia, to meet the needs of growing urban populations. The effects of avian influenza and the threat of future outbreaks of transboundary animal diseases, including animal diseases that affect humans will increase with growing intensification of livestock production. For countries of Asia, and the international community, it is important to make significant and sustained veterinary interventions to cut the cycles of disease transmission and establishment.

In this context, I would like to mention an initiative which FAO and OIE have recently agreed: this is the Global Framework for the Progressive Control of Transboundary Animal Diseases or, in short, GF-TADs. The goal of this initiative is to help strengthen national Veterinary Services for the application of effective epidemiological knowledge to progressive disease control at source. In addition to the necessary strengthening of the veterinary services at the national level, GF-TADs emphasizes regional coordination and cooperation as a prerequisite for the effective control of serious, highly contagious diseases, such as avian influenza, that do not respect international borders. The initiative is getting started in Asia and I invite all countries, regional organizations and donor agencies to support this global effort for systematic profiling the fight against these devastating animal diseases.

Many of the countries currently affected by avian influenza have limited capacity to control these adaptable and highly contagious viruses. They lack effective diagnostic capability and surveillance systems that are essential for early warning and timely response. Veterinary infrastructures must be strengthened, via the provision of scientific and technical advice, equipment and supplies. FAO in the context of the GF-TADs initiative continues to place priority on supporting the implementation of more effective systems for diagnosis, surveillance and control. Affected countries still need more help to actively search for infection and conduct detailed epidemiological analysis. This will help to ensure regional sharing of information and international reporting in a timely and transparent manner. Veterinary services also need access to better tools for diagnosis and disease control, including vaccines that are efficient, cost-effective and

safe.

FAO, in collaboration with OIE, regional organizations and countries, recommends immediate implementation of the following sets of actions at a national, regional and global level.

At the national level, donor assistance is required to help governments:

- To strengthen the central animal health and Veterinary Public Health Services to better manage national surveillance systems, to improve early detection and response, define strategies, and monitor their implementation.
- To implement disease prevention and control programmes, including stamping out, biosecurity and vaccination as appropriate.
- To develop better tools (e.g., diagnostic methods, vaccines, antiviral agents) and analyse their effectiveness and costs, under local conditions, to help mitigate risk.

At the regional and global level, donor assistance is required to help:

- To support incipient regional diagnostic and surveillance networks, improve the quality of epidemiological information and facilitate transparency, sharing of information and early warning, leading to better prevention and control of avian influenza.
- To strengthen regional co-operation with the goal of helping countries harmonize surveillance and control strategies, realize economies of scale and scope, and establish sustainable funding and financial instruments for cross-border activities.

Controlling avian influenza in Viet Nam and in other parts of Asia to decrease the risk to human health and food production in Asia and worldwide is our common duty. The choice of Vietnam for this Conference is relevant, because bird flu has severely affected this country and the Government has introduced substantial control measures. However, due to the widespread existence of the virus in reservoir species, such as ducks, it is very difficult to eliminate it from the country. Viet Nam's surveillance and reporting systems have improved significantly and many lessons can be learned from this case. The control programme needs continuous support and more investment from the Government and the international community to prevent human infection, improve the capacity to find and control the disease and to support the use of vaccination, where appropriate.

FAO, in collaboration with OIE and other partners, has identified a global strategic approach that will require sustained donor support to countries in this region. Stopping the disease at source is a strategy that fully recognizes the importance of sound animal health and veterinary public health infrastructures in dealing with epidemic diseases and promoting food security. It is also the prerequisite for all efforts which countries will undertake in repositioning, rehabilitating or even restructuring their poultry sector. Such repositioning of the poultry sector relies on effective and efficient animal health management capabilities, whichever the role of this sector may be.

I encourage the international community to respond to the urgent requirements of the countries of the region for support in their efforts to get on top of this current serious situation; FAO stands ready to continue assisting in this process.

I look forward to three days of excellent scientific and technical discussion with a practical focus on the refinement of all measures required ranging from technical

interventions through to economic and veterinary public health policies. Once again, thank you for your participation in the meeting - and for helping in the effort to control avian influenza at source.

FAO Animal Production and Health Division
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