My Cabinet Colleagues Shri Sharad Pawar Ji,
Dr. A. Ramadoss Ji,
Dr. Margaret Chan, DG, WHO
Dr. Bernard Vallat, DG OIE
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to welcome delegates to this conference. India is pleased to play host to this gathering not only because we are home to a sizeable poultry business, but also because we have a creditable track record in research on and management of avian flu. Therefore, we have more than just our hospitality to offer our guest from distant lands.

I extend a warm welcome to the Ministers representing various countries. Your presence here underscores the commitment of the political leaderships of our countries to addressing the challenge we face collectively. I am also happy that we have with us the Directors General of World Health Organization, Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Organization of Animal Health.

Avian influenza, like all pandemics, is a global threat and we must all work together to find a global solution. Each of or Governments will have to act locally, but think globally in dealing with the problem.

Avian flu in the poultry sector has caused huge economic losses and threatened the livelihood of millions of people. The best available strategy is to control it at the level of the animal. Any let-up of our pursuit to stop this disease at the first frontier – i.e. the animal, could be catastrophic in consequence for human beings.

We do not yet know the future behaviour of a mutated influenza virus that impacts human health. But we do know that once human-to-human transmission is established there would be a very short time lag before it spreads and impacts every part of the globe. The window of opportunity to take action is, therefore, here and now.

We should guard against institutional fatigue in dealing with such pandemics, and never lower our guard. Eternal vigilance is, indeed, the price of good health, both of our people and our economies.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I do believe that very often the response to such pandemics is narrowly based, being disease-specific and country-specific. Pandemics respect no political boundaries.
Moreover societal response to such pandemics cannot be strait-jacketed into organizational silos. Independent missions and programmes focused on specific diseases.

Often replicate the work of other such programmes. There is multiplication of effort, of staff and of funding. But a more fundamental problem is that we may end up adopting a piece meal approach, without addressing the problem of public health and disease control in a holistic manner.

I do, therefore, think that even as specialists focus on Avian flu or HIV/AIDS or TB or any other such disease, and gather at conferences like these, we must link our efforts across disease vectors and institutional silos. As professionals you may focus on a specific problem. However, as Government we must take a more comprehensive and holistic approach.

In this specific case, of Avian flu, we need to focus as much on human health as on animal health. Investments in public health will be unproductive without ensuring the health of our livestock. Our budgetary policies must match the effort, with adequate funding of animal health programmes, along with funding for human health. The Government of India supports the concept of ‘ONE HEALTH’ based on an integrated approach to animal and human health.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Each outbreak of a pandemic has also taught us new lessons. We need to pool this experience and work together. The world community has exhibited considerable maturity and concern by frequently reviewing and assessing the global situation in such Conferences. The experience of developed countries may not always be relevant for developing countries. Especially if the capabilities are very different. Hence, we need to be sensitive to national capacities and capabilities and build these where necessary through international effort.

In the case of Avian flu and the poultry economy, the situation we confront in the developed and developing countries are different for a variety of reasons. In India, for example, apart from large commercial poultry farms, there are widespread holdings of backyard poultry. These account for thousands of households and millions of farmers. Further, in poorer households, the family’s living space including kitchens, is shared by poultry. In some cultures, chicken are regarded as household pets.

Thus, for small householders and farmers avian flu is a calamity often waiting to happen. Preventive bio-security measures in backyard poultry farming are limited and constitute a challenge for health administrators. I am, therefore, happy to note that your Conference will deliberate on bio-secure poultry and the mitigation of the social and economic impact of such pandemics.

I do believe that focused governmental intervention must go hand-in-hand with community empowerment in addressing such health care challenges. It is important to include all stakeholders in our communication outreach. In the specific
case of Avian influence, such communication should cover the entire production, marketing and commercial chain of poultry production.

In dealing with pandemics and public health challenges, we need a multi-pronged strategy that brings together experts and activists, researchers and administrators, Government departments and civil society organizations.

India acknowledges the supportive role of the United Nations system, its technical agencies and other organizations engaged in the fight against Avian and human Influenza. We find their role in capacity building and drawing up action plans praise-worthy. The World Health Organization, the Food and Agricultural Organization, UNICEF and the World Bank have been helpful partners. I am happy to learn that the UN Systems Influenza Coordinator has commended the preparatory work undertaken by the Government of India and described our response to the outbreaks as ‘quick and correct’.

India is committed to share the experience of control and containment of the outbreak in poultry. The ability and capacity of India’s pharmaceutical industry is recognized the world over. Indian companies are producing Oseltamivir, the recommended drug for Avian Influenza.

India’s scientists are also continuing their work on finding appropriate vaccines for birds and humans. The High Security Disease laboratory at Bhopal has developed a poultry vaccine using the Indian strain. The National Institute of Virology, pune has been working on development of a candidate vaccine for Avian Influenza using the Indian strain. It is also developing a broadly reactive vaccine for diverse influenza viruses. These studies are being taken up as a public-private partnership effort.

We will have the opportunity, at this Conference, to share our Road Map for 2008. We recognize the need for a long-term vision to control and eliminate Avian Influenza and the threat of human pandemic. But we do also see the necessity of taking urgent action now and in the present. Through our Road Map 2008 we endeavour to suggest action points which are deliverable and achievable in the next one year. India commits itself to adhere to the roadmap. We hope that you will find it a useful reference for your own future programmes.

I also hope this Conference provides us all with an opportunity to renew our national and international commitments to dealing with this threat. Many pledges were made at the Beijing Conference in January 2006 as well as at Bamako to support Avian Influenza control and preparedness. Many of these pledges have been fulfilled and generated the resources required for combating Avian Influenza. However, we need more funding support.

I am sure we will do whatever is required and expected of us to deal with the challenge in all its dimensions. I wish you all success in your endeavors.

Thank you.