

## FAO-WHO Opening Remarks

**Speech:** By Dr Babatunde Olowokure (WHO) and Dr Scott Newman (FAO)

**Date:** Monday, 6 May 2013

**Event:** Conference on Resource Mobilization for Influenza A(H7N9)  
Prevention, Control and Preparedness in Viet Nam

**Venue:** Intercontinental, 1A Nghi Tam, Tay Ho, Hanoi

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Your Excellency Dr. Nguyen Thanh Long, Vice Minister of Health;

Your Excellency Mr. Vu Van Tam, Vice Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development;

Representatives from Embassy's

Representatives from ministries, departments, and national institutions

Representatives from international organizations, donors, NGOs, and civil society;

Distinguished guests, friends and colleagues;

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the UN Country Team, I am very pleased to welcome you today to this important event.

First of all, let me express our thanks to the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development for co-chairing this event and for their joint effort with the UN to combat avian influenza and other zoonotic infectious diseases, that have consequences for food safety, food security, human health, and socio-economic development.

In the space of two months avian influenza has reminded us why it remains a potent threat around the world as once again an avian influenza virus has crossed from birds to humans. That virus is avian influenza A(H7N9).

As of 5 May 2013 China has reported 128 cases and 27 deaths from influenza A(H7N9) to WHO. This gives cause for concern as this already exceeds the number of influenza A(H5N1) cases reported by China over the last decade. Another cause for concern is that the virus does not cause serious illness in poultry, and despite intensive surveillance and testing of poultry, wild birds, pigs and other animals, the animal reservoirs remain largely unknown. This means that the virus is likely to spread silently with only the appearance of infections in humans indicating the extent of spread.

Although a massive global effort led by FAO and OIE, to control avian influenza A(H5N1) has led to improved responses to outbreaks in poultry in many countries, long-term

regional and global health security requires that all nations are prepared to detect and respond to potential pandemic situations. As such, the public health threat posed by H7N9 has led most Governments to review services to identify, contain and lessen the impact of dangerous pathogens. Many national plans, however, require revision and greater coordination of planning between ministries and between countries.

Genetic analysis of the H7N9 viruses isolated from patients has indicated that the virus contains several genes that make it more adapted to humans than H5N1. However, there are no reports of sustained human-to-human transmission and only a few family clusters have been identified. The geographical range of this novel virus is currently limited to certain parts of China. However, given that pathogens are now more mobile than in previous years as a result of increased international travel and trade, as well as changes in ecosystems it is possible that cases may appear elsewhere, including Viet Nam which shares a long border with China.

Increased surveillance and rapid response to outbreaks among human and animal populations are therefore essential. Using the framework of the revised International Health Regulations, and with leadership from the World Health Organization, many nations have continued to develop and prepare health and other essential services to respond to the threat of pandemics due to avian influenza viruses. FAO has also played a similar role for animal health. At this stage the UN Country Team would encourage any new funding that would increase and expand these activities, which would also provide positive knock-on effects for efforts to control other zoonotic diseases.

On the basis of currently available scientific evidence from a variety of sources, it is considered that the H7N9 virus is a cause for great concern. As such, the H7N9 challenge requires close collaboration and coordination between the animal and human health sectors to take early action. Attention should be focused on implementing surveillance systems that can rapidly detect the virus if it enters Viet Nam. WHO and FAO will provide expert technical support, and evidence-based advice, other members of the UN family will also contribute to meeting this challenge.

I would like to conclude by urging you to make Viet Nam a priority in the provision of resources and technical assistance in the battle against H7N9. In terms of global health security we are as strong as our weakest link, and one weak link could negate all that has been achieved so far. Much more remains to be done, and that now is not the time for complacency.

Thank you for your attention.