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United Nations Regional Meeting on Avian Influenza
Libreville - Gabon
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FAO OPENING STATEMENT

BY

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His Excellency, the Head of State, President of the Republic of Gabon

His Excellency the Vice President of Gabon

His Excellency the Prime Minister

Honourable Senators

Honourable Members of Parliament

Members of Government

The Dean and Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Regional Representatives of Agencies & Country Representatives – [The UNDP, WHO & UNICEF]

The Senior UN System Influenza Coordinator

Distinguished Participants

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure and honour to be here today to represent the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN in what, by all accounts, is a very important event in the continuing effort to draw up strategies to control Avian Influenza, which, unfortunately, broke out in Africa in February 2006; and to draw up preparedness and contingency plans for the prevention of a potential human pandemic of the disease.

The recent dynamics of avian influenza outbreaks in parts of Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, culminating in the outbreak of the disease between February and March 2006 in Nigeria, Egypt, Niger and Cameroon, require that Africa takes immediate pragmatic steps to coordinate efforts in adopting harmonized control strategies, rapidly detecting and preventing the spread of avian influenza within the continent and beyond. The socio-economic impact, the effect of the disease on peoples' livelihoods and the public health significance of avian influenza, require a multisectoral approach, and that is why it is gratifying to have representatives from different UN Agencies, Member Countries of the UN in NGOs and the Donor Community present to deliberate on ways of controlling avian influenza outbreaks in Africa and to draw up preparedness and contingency plans for the prevention of a human pandemic.

The prevention of a human pandemic first requires effective disease control in poultry i.e. at its source. To combat avian flu at its source, FAO has a multi-pronged approach. First, and perhaps most significant, the Organization is working with countries to strengthen their veterinary services and to improve their capacity to implement biosecurity measures aimed at preventing the disease; to improve the surveillance and detection of avian flu and when detected, to control it and limit its spread.

FAO has been providing advice on how to apply these practices, offering training courses, developing guidelines and manuals, helping to equip veterinary laboratories, accessing AI vaccines, and assisting countries in the design of prevention and control strategies.

A second significant aspect of our activities in avian influenza control involves regional networking and information-sharing. Before the first report of HPAI outbreak in Nigeria in February, 2006, FAO had already launched three Regional Technical Cooperation Projects for Western/Central Africa (coordinated from Bamako, Mali), Eastern and Southern Africa (Coordinated from Nairobi) and North Africa (coordinated from Cairo) The essential elements of these projects are to help start regional networks for improving surveillance,

disease recognition and diagnosis; exchanging information on the occurrence of the disease and on lessons learned elsewhere in combating it. FAO has always stressed the importance of timely reporting of HPAI outbreaks and sharing of epidemiological data and samples with international collaborating partners.

A third dimension of FAO's work has been to provide technical information globally and to advocate for an international campaign against the disease. The establishment of the Emergency Centre for Transboundary Animal Diseases Operations (ECTAD) has provided a focal point for which the multidisciplinary approach required for the control of avian influenza and other transboundary animal diseases, could be effectively harnessed. Of particular significance is the creation of the ECTAD Socio-economic and Policy Working Group, and decentralization of the activities of ECTAD to the regions. FAO could effectively support countries in regional analysis especially in Africa, using common methodologies in order to provide a broad view of the economic implications of alternative disease control strategies. This together with dialogue with national governments and regional co-ordination bodies, would provide assistance in policy development. FAO's support will be of most value if it is backed by co-ordinated requests from affected and at-risk countries for assistance at the national and regional levels and co-ordinated assistance from donors.

FAO is not working in isolation. Partnerships are critical in the control of transboundary animal diseases, especially those of zoonotic significance such as avian influenza. In particular, FAO is in very close partnership with the OIE, the WHO and AU-IBAR. Together with OIE, we have developed a Global Strategy for the Progressive Control of HPAI and are working closely to implement it. We are also working with other UN Agencies, bilateral donors, NGOs and the UN coordinating mechanism under the leadership of Dr David Nabarro.

To conclude, let me emphasize that, as the world takes the necessary measures to prepare for and prevent a major potential human pandemic, greater emphasis must be put in place to stop the disease in its tracks at its source, in animals. To do this requires heavy injection of funds, material and human resources and we count on the support from the donor communities and National Governments as well. FAO looks forward to continuing to work with the UN system, NGOs, National Governments and the donor community to make the control of avian influenza and the prevention of human pandemic - a reality.

Thank you.