

Statement of Mr Jacques Diouf, Director-General of FAO

Special Event on Avian Influenza

23 November 2005, FAO, Rome

*Mr Chairperson,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

Avian influenza is a dangerous and devastating disease. Every effort must be made to stop it in its tracks. It is dangerous because it can move from domestic poultry to humans and has already done so in over 100 documented cases, causing the death of more than 60 people. If the virus were to mutate – as could happen – in a way that allowed easy transmission from human to human, we would be faced with the very real threat of a pandemic.

Since late 2003, avian influenza has devastated several countries of southeast Asia, where over 150 million chickens and ducks have died or been culled. The economies of those countries have suffered greatly, with lost revenue estimated at over \$10 billion. [The Director-General talks *ad libitum* on the psychological effects and economic consequences of the epidemic]. In the affected countries, 200 million persons depend on poultry for their livelihoods and nearly 80% of the population live in rural areas.

As if this were not bad enough, the disease is spreading. With many overlapping flyways, migratory birds could introduce the disease into domestic poultry in Central Europe, the Balkans, the Near East and Africa, and from there to Western Europe and even to the Americas.

While little can be done to control the disease in wild birds, much can be done to halt its spread in domestic poultry, which is the current source for human infection and the cause of the economic losses. If I could leave only one message with you today, it would be to redouble efforts to stop avian flu at its source, in animals, before it affects humans and decimates rural communities. Prevention of a human pandemic first requires effective disease control in poultry.

To combat avian flu at its source, FAO has a multi-pronged approach. First and foremost, we are working with countries to strengthen their veterinary services and to improve local practices on farms and markets in order to: first, implement biosecurity measures aimed at preventing the disease; second, improve surveillance and detection; and third, once detected, control the disease and limit its spread.

There are proven methods to control the disease, such as isolating poultry, good farm hygiene, use of effective vaccines, and quick culling when necessary. These methods work and have produced good results in many countries. FAO is providing advice on how to apply these methods, offering training courses, developing guidelines and manuals, helping equip veterinary

laboratories and provide vaccines, and assisting countries in the design of prevention and control strategies.

A second facet of our work deals with regional networking and information sharing. We have helped start regional networks for improving surveillance and diagnosis of avian flu and for exchanging information on the occurrence of the disease and on lessons learned from the first experiences of combating it. FAO has always stressed the importance of the timely reporting of outbreaks and the sharing of epidemiological data and samples. This is crucial to be able to analyze the characteristics of the viruses, to understand and control the disease, and to prevent human infection. FAO and OIE have jointly appealed to governments to facilitate the exchange of viral strains between veterinary and human health scientific communities.

A third dimension of FAO's work is to provide technical information globally and to advocate for an international campaign against the disease. We provide regular information updates through our website and through various publications, technical articles and press releases. We have also met with and written to multilateral and bilateral donors and government officials in an effort to sound the alarm and mobilize action.

At this point, it is important for me to stress that FAO is not working in isolation. Partnerships are critical. In particular, FAO is in very close partnership with OIE and WHO. Jointly we have developed a Global Strategy for the Progressive Control of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI), and we are working hand-in-glove to implement it.

We are also working with other UN partners, bilateral donors, NGOs and, of course, with the newly initiated UN coordinating mechanism under the leadership of David Nabarro.

During the recent meeting in Geneva, from 7 to 9 November 2005, the international community, including affected countries and financing institutions, recognized the need for the control of the highly pathogenic avian influenza virus at source, that is, in the poultry. It was acknowledged that the control and prevention of avian influenza require extensive action at the national, regional and global levels.

Although FAO's financial resources are limited, we have been able to allocate US\$5.5 million since February 2004 to tackle the crisis that has hit Asia, and a further US\$2 million to address the spread of the disease outside Asia.

To follow up on the meeting in Geneva, a major pledging conference will be held in China on 17 and 18 January 2006. FAO and OIE will present in detail all the funding requirements over the short- and medium-term which amount to US\$500 million over the next three years. During the last two years, FAO has received US\$8.5 million and a further US\$18 million have been promised. I warmly thank those governments that have already made or announced donations, including in alphabetical order Australia, the European Union, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the USA, and invite others to follow their example.

To conclude, let me reiterate that, if the international community is to prepare effectively for a human pandemic, more energetic measures need to be taken to stop this disease at source, that is to say, in animals. This is possible. It can be done. FAO is ready and determined to pursue this work with you all to make it happen.