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By
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Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia

At

World Rabies Day

WHO/SEARO, New Delhi
7 September 2007

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**DR SAMLEE PLIANBANGCHANG
REGIONAL DIRECTOR, WHO SOUTH-EAST ASIA**

Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen; welcome to the World Rabies Day celebrations on 8 September 2007.

Rabies is an ancient disease but we are yet to eliminate it in order for it not to be a public health problem. The vaccine to prevent rabies was developed in 1885. Cost-effective tools for elimination of rabies and modalities for use of these tools are available.

Yet, rabies is still an important public health problem in developing countries, including those of the WHO South-East Asia Region. Human rabies accounts for about 55,000 global deaths each year. More than 99 per cent of all human deaths due to rabies occur in developing countries. Yet, rabies remains a neglected disease in most of these countries.

The South-East Asia Region contributes to about 60% of all global mortality due to this preventable disease. More than 2.5 million people undergo post-exposure prophylaxis after being bitten by rabid or suspected rabid dogs and wild animals. This causes considerable morbidity and economic loss.

Rabies is a zoonotic disease of public health concern in many countries of the South-East Asia Region. The primary source of human rabies is infected dogs, with 96% of

all rabies deaths in the South-East Asia Region occurring after bites by rabid dogs. Children and poor people are at the greatest risk.

The Control of rabies in the canine population is fundamental to the elimination of the disease. The Regional Strategy for Rabies Elimination was drafted in 1998. The strategy focuses on:

- Reduction of rabies in animal reservoirs through immunization of animals, especially dogs; and
- Promotion of early human post-exposure treatment.

These may seem to be simple though their application requires considerable effort. Political commitment is an important pre-requisite. There is a need for nationally coordinated programmes and activities in which all stakeholders actively play their roles. Communities are to be closely involved in rabies control activities.

The abundance of street dogs in metropolitan areas of countries of the South-East Asia Region is a growing problem. Dogs are prolific breeders. They can multiply rapidly and survive on food, water and shelter made available to them wilfully or through the improper disposal of garbage. The high turnover of the canine population is a real challenge to achieve desirable rabies vaccination coverage. On the other hand, it is difficult to restrain stray or ownerless dogs for the purpose of vaccination.

Local authorities and community-based organizations will have to play a greater role in animal birth control and welfare. Many NGOs in several countries of the Region are involved in surgical sterilization of street dogs in cities and towns. But this has had limited effect on the overall control of the dog population.

To improve the coverage of dog vaccination in inaccessible areas, WHO advocates coordinated field studies on oral vaccination. This method may constitute a useful complementary strategy to increase dog vaccination coverage.

Many people love dogs but due to a lack of understanding they rarely devote much attention to dog health. This is especially true among the poor and rural population. Dogs are man's good friends, in many aspects; they are part of family. Even stray dogs are considered a welcome part of the community in many societies.

There is need to promote responsible dog ownership, which includes rabies vaccination. This is a pivotal step to protect families, neighbours and communities from this preventable disease. Recent studies show that many people became victims of rabies because of negligence and ignorance. Inadequate medical services at the peripheral level leads to their mortality. Advocacy to create awareness among the population at risk is a powerful tool to help in the battle against rabies. A comprehensive national control programme is needed for the elimination of rabies. It has to be a multisectoral programme, involving the health and animal sectors, with full responsibility on the part of the municipal authorities.

Dog rabies elimination is difficult, but is not an impossible task. With determined political commitment and the innovative use of available tools, elimination of dog rabies is an attainable goal.

Beginning this year, World Rabies Day will be organized on 8 September each year to promote political commitment and create awareness among the population at risk. WHO and OIE (Organization for Animal Health) are the co-sponsors of this initiative.

I earnestly urge governments, institutions, communities, professional bodies and other organized groups to recognize the gravity of the problem of rabies and try to prevent it with their best possible efforts.

Please join hands to eliminate rabies as a public health problem in the South-East Asia Region.

Thank you.