

Opening Address

By
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Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia

At

***Regional Conference of Ministers of Health and Agriculture
and Livestock on Avian Influenza and Pandemic
Preparedness***

New Delhi, India
28 July 2006

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REGIONAL DIRECTOR, WHO SOUTH-EAST ASIA**

H.E. Mr Sharad Pawar, Hon. Minister of Agriculture, Food and Public Distribution, Government of India; H.E. Dr Anbumani Ramadoss, Hon. Minister of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India; Mr He Changchui, Assistant Director General/Regional Representative, FAO, Asia and Pacific Regional Office; Dr Teruhide Fujita, Regional Representative, OIE, Asia Pacific Region; Excellencies, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen:

With great pleasure, I welcome you all to this important Regional Conference.

Today, there is a formidable challenge of emerging diseases. During the recent years, we have witnessed the outbreaks of Nipah and SARS. And now, we are facing the threat posed by avian influenza.

Basically, avian influenza affects animals, particularly birds and poultry. This virus has been found highly pathogenic, and entrenched in the poultry of several countries in this part of the world.

Outbreaks due to this virus have severely affected the poultry industry, impacting on the livelihood of many poor people. Equally alarming is that this H5N1 virus has now crossed over the species. It has already infected humans in ten countries globally. As of today, 232 human cases of avian influenza have been reported world-wide. Of these, 134 have died.

The disease has been characterized by a high case fatality rate; more than 50 per cent. Recognizing the seriousness of the situation, WHO has been assisting Member States in taking steps to avert any potential for a pandemic.

After the first case of human Avian influenza was detected, WHO convened a meeting of experts in 1999. A global preparedness plan for influenza pandemic was formulated.

When more cases of human Avian influenza were reported, this plan was subsequently updated in 2004. It has been used by those responsible for public health and medical emergency, in ensuring effective response to the pandemic.

The plan contains, among others, the various phases of a potential pandemic. Globally, we are now in the Pandemic Alert Phase III, where infection in humans is rare. All Member States have already formulated national pandemic preparedness plans.

These plans are only the blueprints for action. They will remain on paper, unless we implement them. I am glad to report that our Member States have already started implementing their plans. And we have learnt various lessons.

It is clear, among others, that, to be successful in implementing the plans, intersectoral collaboration, especially between agriculture and health is of paramount importance. In the countries where these two sectors have collaborated well, the outbreaks in animals and in humans have been contained.

We also learnt that we have to act promptly and effectively in a transparent manner. The Member States have re-affirmed the need for transparency in sharing information concerning Avian influenza. They have also agreed to the voluntary compliance with the relevant provisions in the revised International Health Regulations.

To implement the pandemic preparedness plan, an adequate number of trained staff is needed. And we need to have sufficient resources.

Today, we are at a critical juncture in the history of human infectious diseases. The influenza virus has been known to have caused major pandemics, with severe health and economic consequences. No one can precisely predict its occurrence. But now, we have some clue of the features of a virus with pandemic potential.

If the H5N1 virus undergoes mutation and/or reassortment, it could cause a major devastating pandemic. This is because very few people would be adequately immune against the disease.

It is believed that, if an avian influenza pandemic begins, there will be a window of only few weeks to take action to contain it. It is really a very short time-span. Therefore, we need to be really well prepared now.

The catastrophic impact of not preparing or of inadequate preparation for this pandemic will be beyond human imagination. Countless deaths will occur, there will be disruption of travel and commerce, and our major activities will come to a grinding halt. There will also be a tremendous psychosocial impact on the affected population.

The participation in the meeting of honourable Ministers and partners from diverse areas reflects a clear commitment and dedication to the cause. I wish the Conference all success.

Thank you.