

***Opening Remarks***

***By***

***Dr Samlee Plianbangchang  
Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia***

***at***

***Regional Meeting on Avian Influenza and  
Pandemic Preparedness***

***Bangkok, Thailand  
21-24 November 2005***

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REGIONAL DIRECTOR, WHO SOUTH-EAST ASIA**

Distinguished participants;

Colleagues;

Ladies and gentlemen.

- With great pleasure, I welcome you all to this meeting.
- The meeting has been organized in the light of the urgent need to ensure preparedness of countries in facing the challenge of Avian Influenza.
- Today, Avian Influenza is a serious health threat worldwide, in both animals and humans.
- It is one of the most formidable socioeconomic challenges anywhere.
- The huge impact of the current Avian Influenza outbreak on national economies of the affected countries is really a major international concern.
- It is a clear indication that infectious diseases are not merely a threat to health, but also have a wider implication on other aspects of development.
- Even more worrisome is that the causative pathogens are ever-changing their nature to become more virulent.
- With the increasing volume of international tourism, travel, and trade; the infectious agents will continue threatening the health of people everywhere.

- Emerging infectious diseases are the leading cause of morbidity and mortality in Asia and in many other parts of the world.
- In 2003, SARS was the first in this category of diseases to cause a pandemic of the twenty-first century.
- It spread to more than 30 countries around the world.
- Asia was the epicentre of that pandemic.
- And Asia suffered the most, both in terms of lives lost and economic disruption.
- During this year, Asia has found itself, yet again, in the same situation.
- But, perhaps facing a more deadly event this time.
- Human cases of Avian Influenza have been found in Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia; and in Indonesia.
- Just last week, three cases of human avian influenza were reported in China.
- This could be the beginning of the first pandemic of influenza in this century.
- And Avian Influenza might cause this pandemic.

Distinguished participants,

- The challenge before us now is how to prevent and control Avian Influenza outbreaks successfully, in both animals and humans.
- This is in order to effectively mitigate the impact of the pandemic, if it occurs.
- The outbreaks of highly pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) in poultry, which started in 2003, have been historically unprecedented in scope and severity.
- The slow, but steady spread of the pathogen in avian species is now alarmingly highlighted.

- It has been found most recently in bird flocks across Europe.
- According to FAO, this pathogen is really endemic, and firmly entrenched in poultry in many parts of Asia.
- With close proximity between humans and poultry, ample opportunity exists for the virus to be transmitted to man.
- It is believed that this will certainly give rise to a mutant strain of the agent, that can cause a pandemic in man with serious consequences.
- Human casualties and economic loss will be enormous.
- As of today, the Avian Influenza or H5N1 virus has reportedly caused 129 human cases, of which 65 have died.
- So far, most of these cases have been linked to direct exposure to dead or sick poultry.
- This may imply that the virus is still unable to jump from man-to-man easily.

Ladies and gentlemen,

- An influenza pandemic is indeed a public health emergency.
- And it is inevitable now.
- If it happens, there will be serious health, social and economic consequences world-wide.
- Only, when it will happen, is still uncertain.
- We actually have a window of opportunity to prepare against this most deadly disease and its devastation.
- We must accord the highest priority to prepare ourselves as early as possible, before the inevitable pandemic strikes.

- Keeping in mind that many countries in our Region are not well-equipped to handle effectively a potential pandemic in humans, they are likely to be the worst affected.
- At its peak, the pandemic is likely to overload the health care systems.
- There will be an urgent need for large number of hospital beds, doctors, other health care workers, vaccines, medicines, and many more.
- We will need facilities to isolate a very large number of cases.
- Quarantine to be applied in the community to limit the spread of the disease will be another key issue.
- An issue that bears a number of social, economic and political implications.
- This situation could bring life to a grinding stop; affecting workplaces, industries, schools, tourism, and travels.
- In fact, all aspects of life will be overwhelmingly affected.
- The economic and social costs of the epidemic could be very high.
- However, we can certainly alleviate the adverse impact by anticipating its course, and being prepared to respond.
- Pandemic preparedness planning is crucial indeed.
- This is to ensure that all the required resources are mobilized, coordinated and made available.
- Expertise and services are made ready for rapid deployment, in case of an emergency.
- The impact in terms of human morbidity and mortality, and the resultant economic loss must be minimized to the extent possible.

- All Member States need to develop comprehensive, multisectoral plans; with full political leadership and support at the highest level.
- Multisectoral plans for preparedness and response should integrate the work of concerned sectors, particularly agriculture and health.
- This is to take into account, at the same time, the health of both animals and humans.
- It would be unrealistic to prepare a pandemic preparedness plan in a short period of time, without adequate involvement of all stakeholders.
- As far as human health is concerned, even though the health sector may play a leading role, the expertise and support of a wide-range of disciplines will undoubtedly be needed in the development and implementation of the plan.

Distinguished participants,

- I am very pleased to say that most Member States in our Region have already drafted their national plans for pandemic preparedness.
- All such plans, however, require further review, refinement and updating.
- And, most important, it has to be ensured that the work relating to both animal and human health is properly integrated in the same plans.
- WHO, with FAO and OIE, is to provide technical and other necessary support to countries in preparing and refining these plans.
- WHO is also to help in investigating the outbreaks of human cases, when and where they occur.
- WHO support is provided for strengthening countries' capacities in disease surveillance and laboratory back up.
- WHO is also procuring and stockpiling antiviral drugs and vaccine.

- This is to ensure availability of these medical supplies for use by countries, when needed.

Ladies and gentlemen,

- In addition to drugs and vaccine, we should also apply certain public health interventions in our preparedness,
- We should go in a big way, through information and communication, to help educate people to be able to do everything possible to protect their own health.
- We should tell people and the community on how to protect themselves through improved hygiene, sanitation, food safety, nutrition and physical exercise.
- We should develop a package of educational messages that are easily understood by lay people.
- These messages should be translated into local languages and dialects, and disseminated as widely as possible.
- This approach will certainly increase the confidence of people and the community in preparing themselves to face the pandemic .
- These public health measures, at the same time, will have an important impact on the prevention of other communicable diseases.

Distinguished participants,

- Today, the world community acknowledges that partnerships are crucial for any development work.
- In this case, partnerships are important to ensure coordinated efforts of all stakeholders.

- These coordinated efforts will lead to effective containment of the rapid spread of infectious diseases across international borders.

Ladies and gentlemen,

- Recognizing the need to ensure global health security for humans through a more effective enforcement of international legal framework, the 58th World Health Assembly adopted the revised International Health Regulations (IHR).
- This was with the view to dealing more effectively with the outbreaks and international spread of communicable diseases.
- The revised regulations will reinforce the need for strengthening core capacities of Member States for the prevention and control of infectious diseases.
- These capacities essentially include surveillance, outbreak investigation, laboratory back ups, and epidemic preparedness and response.
- It is now the responsibility of each Member State to ensure such core capacities in the country, in both technical and managerial terms.
- This is in order to fulfill the requirements for the enforcement of the revised regulations.
- The implementation of these regulations will start by mid-2007.
- The two-year gap from 2005 is for Member States to build up their core competence and capacities.
- In addition to helping in resource mobilization, WHO will provide all necessary support to countries in this challenging exercise.

Colleagues,

- Countries in the Asia Pacific Region are unfortunately vulnerable to frequent outbreaks of communicable diseases.
- This is because of the prevailing socio-economic and cultural conditions.
- While countries in this part of the world face similar health threats, the ability to protect their populations from those threats varies widely.
- We recognize that the full protection of the entire population from communicable diseases is difficult.
- However, we must help countries in every way possible to ensure the effectiveness of this protection as much as possible.
- Weak links in the prevention and control of communicable diseases must be anticipated, and plans prepared for strengthening such links.
- In this connection, the Asia Pacific Strategy for Emerging Diseases has been developed.
- The strategy provides a framework to improve health protection of the populations through partnerships.
- With combined efforts from all partners and stakeholders, the weak links in such prevention and control will be strengthened through the implementation of this strategy.
- Coupled with the revised International Health Regulations, the Asia Pacific strategy will help enhance the effectiveness of national and regional preparedness.
- And, the countries will be better prepared to respond effectively to Avian Influenza in human and its imminent pandemic.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- The role of public health institutions in combating emerging diseases cannot be overstated.
- Networking of these institutions can enhance the efficiency and development of required skilled human resources.
- These investments will then contribute effectively to the establishment of sensitive and responsive surveillance and early warning systems.
- The Field Epidemiology Training Programmes, among many others, have played a significant role all over the world, in the development of these resources.
- In view of the challenges and based on our experiences in dealing with SARS and Avian Influenza, the development of skilled manpower should be considered a top priority.
- Capable and competent staff is the basis for ensuring the core capacities to deal effectively with the imminent pandemic of influenza.
- In pursuing this, we need expertise in various areas, such as, general public health, epidemiology, virology, and zoonosis.
- We also need expertise in other disciplines, such as, social and preventive medicine.

Distinguished participants,

- I look forward to your productive deliberations on these important issues as mentioned earlier.

- I am confident that this meeting will contribute significantly to enhancing our ongoing efforts in preventing and controlling Avian Influenza, particularly in humans.
- And, also in preventing and controlling other emerging infectious diseases.
- Let us all stay vigilant and work closely to overcome these formidable challenges facing us today.
- Finally, I wish you all success in your deliberations and an enjoyable stay in Bangkok.
- Thank you.