



**STATEMENT BY**

**THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED NATIONS  
GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

**H.E. MR. JAN ELIASSON**

**AT THE**

**OPENING OF THE ECOSOC SPECIAL EVENT ON  
AVIAN INFLUENZA**

**UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS**

**NEW YORK**

**3 NOVEMBER 2005**

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

I welcome this initiative to hold a Special Event on Avian flu. Like the productive recent event on the African food crisis, it is an example of the revitalization of ECOSOC in practice. I commend you, Mr President, for continuing to bring this about. It responds very well to the World Summit's call for ECOSOC to 'develop its ability to respond better and more rapidly to developments in the international economic, environmental and social fields'. I am gratified to see the presence of so many prominent speakers and a format which will, I trust, allow for interactive discussion.

Just a year ago, I took part in a role play, 'Atlantic Storm', in which we had to face up to the very difficult decisions with which governments and the international community would be faced in the event of a major global disease outbreak, in this case a smallpox epidemic. I played the role of the Swedish Prime Minister. This brought home to me that our awareness, preparedness and training are sorely lacking to meet threats of this nature.

Since then, the value of that exercise to me has grown as the threat of a new influenza pandemic has moved into ever sharper focus. As the President of ECOSOC has set out, we are now closer to another human influenza pandemic than at any time since the late 1960s. Yet we do not know when the pandemic will strike, and with what severity.

For policymakers and all of us, this raises several dilemmas. How much to invest? What priority to give to global efforts – including resource allocation

– to prevent the pandemic’s spread, versus national efforts to ensure vaccines are in place to deal with any outbreak?

We have experts here today better qualified than I to discuss the answers to these questions. But for me Avian flu, and the danger of a human pandemic arising from it, graphically illustrates why the world needs a well funded and well organized multilateral system.

SARS killed 800 people and cost the world \$30 billion. But had the World Health Organization’s Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network not kicked in so well, we might have been looking at something far worse. Controlling avian flu will depend upon countries being willing and able to share information about outbreaks without delay through the WHO, FAO and the World Organization for Animal Health, so that the world’s resources can be swiftly marshalled to respond.

This is not something nation states can do alone. If the United Nations system can effectively lead the world’s response, and do it well, we will have given our critics irrefutable practical evidence of what this Organization can do.

Avian flu also underlines the extent to which we have all become interdependent in a globalised world. Suddenly, overstretched, underfunded, ill-equipped and understaffed health services in some of the poorest countries of the world are no longer just the concern of those countries, or of donor agencies with an altruistic mission.

They must be a concern for all our peoples, of whatever continent or income group – it is particularly timely that the General Assembly is currently considering a draft resolution on action to improve our public health systems globally.

If Avian flu takes hold in a country without the basic health infrastructure to deal with it, we could all face very severe consequences. Many lives would be lost, development gains reversed, and the magnitude of the threat to all our health multiplied. I cannot think of a more stark way of reminding ourselves that achieving the Millennium Development Goals is not only a moral imperative, but an act of enlightened self-interest for us all.