

**Special Event on “The Avian Flu”
ECOSOC Chamber
Thursday, 3 November 2005**

PRESIDENT’S SUMMARY

I. BACKGROUND

The Special Event of the Economic and Social Council on the Avian Flu, which was held on Thursday, 3 November 2005, was the second in a series launched by the Council in response to the new mandate given to the Council by the 2005 World Summit to “develop its ability to respond better and more rapidly to developments in the international economic, environmental and social fields” and to “support and complement international efforts aimed at addressing humanitarian emergencies.”

The Special Event, opened by the President of ECOSOC, Ambassador Munir Akram of Pakistan, was well-attended by delegations, representatives of the organizations of the United Nations family, and civil society. It began with an opening statement by H.E. Mr. Jan Eliasson, President of the 60th Session of the General Assembly. This was followed by a panel discussion with the participation of Ms. Louise Fresco, Assistant Director-General for Agriculture, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations; Dr. David Heymann, Representative of the Director-General of the World Health Organization; Dr. David Nabarro, Senior United Nations System Coordinator for Avian and Human Influenza; and Mrs. Margareta Walstrohm, Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator. An interactive dialogue with Member States followed.

II. OVERVIEW

The main message of the panelists was that there is still an opportunity to prevent the avian flu from becoming a pandemic, provided immediate action is taken to control the spread of the virus at source, that is, in animals. For this to happen, international collaboration through **strong and effective multilateral system** is indispensable.

A number of participants recognized that developing countries lack adequate means and tools to put in place preparedness and response plans. According to available estimates, the price tag for prevention at source, among animals, may reach \$425 million, while only \$30 million has been made available so far. It was against this backdrop that the President of ECOSOC called for the establishment of a global fund to take preventive action against a possible avian flu pandemic, including compensating farmers and producers for the costs of culling poultry.

Even though the virus did not spread easily among humans, it was having a huge effect on bird population. However, it could cause a pandemic and massive devastation,

once a new mutant flu virus is able to infect humans. Indeed, one panelist noted that every country, every population is at risk for pandemic influenza whether or not it has sick birds. The likely damage to the trade and the international economy was considered to be high.

The lessons learnt from past experiences with new and re-emerging diseases indicate that if such diseases were not quickly identified and controlled, they were likely to have significant costs in health, financial, trade and even security terms. Secondly, special attention needed to be paid to the needs of developing countries. Many developing countries, especially the least developed countries, already bore a heavy burden of disease, malnutrition, poor veterinarian and health infrastructure and systems. These countries needed both technical and financial assistance in designing and implementing preparedness and response plans. The role of development cooperation thus remained critical in confronting global public health threats, especially when the international community was keen on ensuring the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Thirdly, transparency and speed in reporting cases was crucial to marshal an effective and timely response.

The Panelists identified a number of challenges, including most importantly, the need for all countries to develop national **pandemic influenza preparedness plans**. Such plans should include measures such as early warning systems, surveillance for the disease in animals and humans, the implementation of biosecurity measures, use of effective vaccines, close monitoring and culling when necessary and incentives for farmers to report by providing them with compensation for losses incurred by culling. Cross-departmental involvement at the national level under the leadership of a high-level focal point within Government in liaison with experienced **contingency planners** was also highly recommended.

The communication between UN system and governments and all stakeholders and the use of **risk communication** for creating global awareness including innovative communication techniques were also considered as vital.

Another essential element of the strategy to contain the virus was **access to affordable anti-viral medicines**. Presently, no pandemic vaccine was ready for commercial production and no country was likely to have adequate supplies until several months after a pandemic is declared. Resources should therefore be put into expanding production of anti-virals as well as seasonal flu vaccines to meet potential rather than current demand. **Research and development into effective vaccines** and investment in manufacturing capacity was, therefore, urgently needed as the lead time between the emergence of the virus and the production of the vaccine must be as short as possible to minimize the death toll. The issue of the appropriate use of intellectual property rights in ensuring adequate and affordable supplies of vaccines and medicines was also raised.

A number of participants pointed to the **role of partnerships** in effectively responding to avian flu. It was noted that private entities can help improve veterinary health surveillance, building capacity and improving impact. They can also engage community

organizations in stimulating changes in behavior and can also assist with the mobilization of resources.

A larger role for **regional organizations** was considered as crucial, particularly in establishing regional coordination mechanisms for early warning and surveillance capacity building. A number of participants noted the establishment of an ASEAN Task Force on Highly Pathogenic Influenza in December 2004 as a best practice that could be replicated in other regions. The establishment of regional stockpiles for antiviral drugs to allow for rapid deployment in the 24 hours following the infection was proposed by one country.

Participants stressed a central role for the United Nations system, supported by its technical agencies, the Food and Agricultural Organization and the World Health Organization, in the coordination of local, national, regional and global preparations for a potential human influenza pandemic. In this connection, the coordination function vis-à-vis development banks, donor agencies, private entities, non-governmental groups, humanitarian agencies and professional bodies was emphasized. The issue of the effective streamlining of coordination was raised so that excessive time was not diverted from operational issues. Delegations were assured that when the world is at imminent risk of pandemic influenza, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator and the country inter-agency humanitarian team within countries will be mobilized and ready for response.

III. ANNEX

A. Summary of Statements

H.E. Ambassador Munir Akram, President of the Economic and Social Council said that avian flu, like SARS and HIV/AIDS and other new and re-emerging diseases, demonstrated that no country was exempt from the spread of infectious diseases. He pointed out that one of the lessons of the past was that infectious diseases must be quickly and effectively contained to avoid grave health and economic consequences. He noted that the poor would be hardest hit in terms of illness as well as bearing the brunt of economic loss from preventive measures taken to control the disease. In this context, the President said that the role for development cooperation would be critical and proposed the establishment of a global fund that would be dedicated to helping countries put in place preparedness and response plans and for compensating farmers and producers for losses due to culling poultry. The President also welcomed the collaborative efforts of FAO and WHO in bringing the attention of the global community of the urgency of the Avian flu threat and urged other UN system agencies, funds and programmes, within their respective mandates, to consider how to address health issues in their activities. He noted that the case for addressing health as a major cross-cutting issue in the Council's long-term agenda had become relevant in the context of the "globalization" of new and re-emerging diseases. President also called for more support for investment and research in vaccines and other actions that would ensure that the entire world shares in the burden and costs – but also fruits of prevention and care.

H.E. Mr. Jan Eliasson, President of the General Assembly referred to his recent participation in a role play "Atlantic Storm" in which the international community would be faced with a major global disease outbreak, as being key to his own awareness that preparedness and training are sorely lacking in meeting threats such as avian flu. In his view, avian flu amply demonstrated the need for an effective multilateral system. He said that if the United Nation system can effectively lead the world's response and do it well, "we will have given our critics irrefutable practical evidence of what the Organization can do." Noting that the quality of the health systems in the poorest countries of the world is now a concern for all countries, President Eliasson said that achieving the Millennium Development Goals was not only a moral imperative, but an act of enlightened self-interest for us all.

Ms. Louise Fresco, Assistant Director-General for Agriculture, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) expressed optimism that action taken now to eliminate the virus among poultry could delay or prevent the transformation of the avian flu virus into a form that would create a human pandemic. With the poultry population at 18 billion, the spill-over of the virus to other species like cats and tigers, its circulation in wild birds, the persistence of the virus in cold water, its spread to Europe and its likely spread throughout the Middle East, North, East and West Africa, made its containment a difficult challenge. For these reasons, immediate action has to be taken to contain the disease at the source through a multi-pronged approach to: (i) implement bio-security measures aimed at preventing the disease; (ii) improve the surveillance and detection of the disease and; (iii) once detected, control the disease and limit its spread.

Dr. David Heymann, Representative of the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed that as soon as the avian flu virus is able to infect humans, a pandemic would be inevitable. To limit its spread and damage, Dr. Heymann proposed a better surveillance system of infected animals and humans through field investigations, diagnostic supports, and incentives for people to report. He stressed that communication is key for an effective response and suggested that innovative web-based tools should be tried. In his view, communicating vital information to the public would minimize social and economic disruption. He underscored the need for investment in research for a vaccine against the pandemic influenza, as well as in increasing manufacturing capacity. The production of seasonal flu vaccine must be stepped up immediately so that the production of a future vaccine against the pandemic influenza, which must be a priority, can be started as soon as possible. Referring to the joint meeting of the WHO, FAO and the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) and the World Bank scheduled for 7-9 November 2005, Dr. Heymann stressed the need to address capacity and resource issues in order to confront the problems ahead.

Dr. David Nabarro, Senior United Nations System Coordinator for Avian and Human Influenza said that the United Nations system needed to re-task itself to support countries to respond to the Avian flu virus and future pandemics. He pointed to a number of challenges that Governments and the international community now faces, as including: (i) improving animal health infrastructure to reduce the scale of the epidemic and to stamp out any new outbreaks, lead by ministries of agriculture with support from other ministries and departments as well as FAO and OIE through bilateral agreements; (ii) cross sectoral preparations for the next influenza pandemic through a cross-departmental process headed by a high level government official; (iii) contingency planning for pandemic response; (iv) building stocks of essential medicines and health care consumables; (v) building partnerships and networks linking the UN system to private groups (for-profit and not-for-profit); (vi) ensuring consistency of public communications about influenza issues; (vii) establishing clear and sustainable support for country efforts and; (viii) ensuring that the FAO/WHO/World Bank/OIE 7-9 November meeting yields a programme of work which will benefit communities that face the greatest risks. The Strategy to be adopted aims to (i) better control the current epidemic of avian influenza; (ii) prevent –or at least delay- the next influenza pandemic and; (iii) respond effectively to the pandemic when it eventually comes.

Ms. Margareta Wahlstrom, Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator noted that the avian flu had not yet developed into a humanitarian crisis, but that it was important to develop the mechanisms and tools to prepare and plan for the humanitarian consequences of a possible pandemic. Such preparedness efforts should take into account capacities at national and international levels. At the international level, the UN system should apply existing and well-tested emergency response tools. Early warning and contingency planning teams have already been mobilized in parts of Asia in support of resident/humanitarian coordinators and UN country teams. At the country level, national and local governments, UN agencies and NGOs should work together to improve (i) common logistics services; (ii) resource mobilization and lobbying; (iii) the tracking of resources and; (iv) the development of an effective early warning system. The challenge will be to maintain a coherent body of

knowledge and effectively manage information to support decision making in a potential humanitarian crisis.

B. The Interactive Debate

A number of countries (Canada, China, Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, United Kingdom on behalf of the European Union, the United States of America, and Vietnam) participating in the interactive debate outlined their national plans and initiatives taken to prevent the spread of avian flu and its transformation into a pandemic. They stressed the importance of international cooperation to prevent a global influenza-pandemic outbreak and, in this connection, underscored the role of the United Nations system in leading efforts to help countries build capacity for pandemic planning and in effectively coordinating regional and other efforts.

For further details, including statements of panelists and delegations, please visit:
http://www.un.org/docs/ecosoc/meetings/2005/Avian_Flu.html