



Press Release

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The development perspective

A column by UN Resident Co-ordinator, Finn Reske-Nielsen

The H5N1 avian influenza virus is firmly established among animals in Asia and has begun to extend its reach into Europe. WHO has confirmed that in 2005-2006, 42 people have died in Asia due to H5N1.

Avian influenza is known to be spread by migratory birds and physical factors, such as, bird contaminated cages and clothing and the international trade in live poultry. Crowded poultry markets exacerbate the problem. The main mode of transmission to humans has been exposure to infected birds. Almost all cases have been traced to this mode or the handling of infected carcasses.

The Government of Lao PDR, with support from a United Nations interdisciplinary team, has completed a national influenza plan that was presented at the International Pledging Conference on Avian and Human Influenza held in Beijing from the 17-18 January 2006. This meeting, co-sponsored by the Government of the People's Republic of China, the European Commission and the World Bank is being held to help ensure that the key activities of the national plans of countries at risk get funded.

The increased fear of a pandemic at the current time is due to the fact that the H5N1 strain causing the outbreak is capable of changing. If the virus changes in such a way that it may be transmitted directly from one human to another, it could spread very fast and cause a global influenza pandemic. The current strain causes high mortality among humans, with mortality rates exceeding 50 percent in most countries. UNESCAP estimates that if there is a global pandemic of highly pathogenic avian influenza, the number of people that may die could range from 5 million to 150 million globally.

So far, the East Asian region is the highest at risk and has suffered large human and economic losses. In Viet Nam, 17 percent of poultry stocks totaling 261 million dollars have been destroyed and direct losses are estimated as over US\$ 200 million. In Indonesia, 23% of poultry farmers have lost their jobs and direct losses have been over US\$ 170 million. The impact has been felt hardest by small and medium sized farmers, whose stocks are often not insured and who have no alternative sources of income. According to the United Nations, the economic losses to the Asian poultry sector in case of a pandemic would be around US\$ 10 billion.

A global pandemic would result in the restriction of people's movements and reduced consumer spending. It would also have an impact on long-term economic growth by the destruction of human capital and inhibiting the movement of goods across countries and regions.

It is encouraging to note that the Lao Government is taking the threat of a pandemic very seriously. The recently approved influenza plan has been developed in accordance with best international practices to prevent, prepare for and respond to a pandemic. It comprises of five strategies that address animal and human health, public information and institutional and legal arrangements. The Government has also established a high-level committee, chaired by the Prime Minister, to oversee its speedy implementation. A core element of the plan is to ensure that people are informed about the dangers of avian influenza and that systems are in place across the country to immediately report suspected cases in animals and humans alike. Over the next three years external assistance in the amount of some US\$ 15 million will be required to implement the plan, including the development of human and institutional capacity.

The UN would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the Government on the work done so far. We expect to continue working closely with the Government, donors and development partners to combat this threat.

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Notes for editors:

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