



## Press Release

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### **Lao PDR must prepare for the bird flu threat**

*Workshop plans national communication and mobilization campaign*

**Vientiane, 17 May 2006** Over 60 participants from central government and international agencies are holding a two day workshop in Vientiane to develop a national communication plan to help the country prevent the spread of avian influenza.

The Minister of Health, Dr Ponmek Dalalay and Mr Finn Reske-Nielsen, UN Resident Coordinator opened the workshop with calls for speedy action to use the power of communication and mobilization in the battle against the bird flu virus.

“I am pleased to open this important workshop which symbolizes the commitment of the Lao Government to respond to the threat of avian influenza as a matter of national priority requiring urgent action,” said the UN Resident Coordinator in his opening remarks. Mr Reske-Nielsen noted that the bird flu virus is affecting not only Asia, but has also spread to Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

Bird flu is a highly contagious disease that affects poultry. Once infected both domestic and wild birds – including chickens – can become sick and die. In rare cases, human beings who come into contact with sick birds can themselves become infected.

As May 12, 2006 the World Health Organization has reported 215 confirmed human cases of bird flu from ten countries. Of those infected, 115 have died. Children account for about half of these human cases, and for a third the deaths caused by this deadly virus. Among those countries reporting human cases are four that border with Lao PDR: Cambodia, China, Thailand and Vietnam.

Lao PDR experienced outbreaks of bird flu in poultry in 2004, mostly in commercial poultry farms in Vientiane Capital, Savannakhet, and Champasack. There have been no confirmed human cases of bird flu in the country to date.

Participants in the workshop will receive updates on the impact of avian influenza on animal and human health and share experiences from neighboring countries in using communication to respond to this threat. They will develop a communication plan and establish an IEC Task Force responsible for ensuring that mass media and social mobilization campaigns are prepared and disseminated on an urgent basis.

The national communication workshop is taking place under the umbrella of the Lao Government’s National Avian Influenza Control and Pandemic Preparedness Plan, which covers the period 2006 - 2010. The plan includes a Strategy 4 on “Health Education and Community Action”. United Nations and other agencies are providing both technical and financial support for the Lao Government’s avian influenza plan.

UNICEF is taking a lead role in supporting the communication and mobilization plan. Its assistance to the Lao Government has been funded through a generous contribution from the Government of Japan.

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