



*In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful*

**Opening Remarks**

to the

**THIRD SUB-REGIONAL WORKSHOP ON RAPID RESPONSE  
FOR AVIAN AND PANDEMIC INFLUENZA**

**Lahore, Pakistan, 18–22 June 2007**

Dear Colleagues,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to the Third Sub-regional Workshop on Rapid Response for Avian and Pandemic Influenza. I would like to express my great appreciation to the national authorities of Pakistan for hosting this important workshop and to our colleagues from WHO headquarters for their participation and for sharing with us their experience in controlling avian influenza outbreaks and preparedness for human pandemic influenza in different parts of the world. I would, also, like to extend special thanks to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for their generous support to the Regional Office and to the Naval Medical Research Unit Three (NAMRU-3), a WHO collaborating centre, for their continuing support to the Member States within the Region.

Dear Colleagues,

The emergence and wide spread of the highly pathogenic H5N1 strain of avian influenza viruses has generated unprecedented global response in anticipation of a potential influenza pandemic. The virus has crossed the species barrier and humans have been infected. Because of the wide spread of the virus, its adaptability and continuous mutation, H5N1 strain is considered to have the potential to trigger the next pandemic of human influenza. The recent outbreaks of influenza A (H5N1) among poultry and humans have moved the world closer to a pandemic than at any time since 1968. Nevertheless, a very different strain of influenza virus could yet be responsible for the anticipated pandemic of human influenza.

Eleven out of the 22 countries in our Region have been affected by the virus so far. Human cases have been reported from Iraq, Egypt and Djibouti. Egypt has witnessed the largest cluster of human cases outside south-east Asia and has reported the highest number of confirmed human cases of avian influenza globally since the beginning of 2007 (16 cases). The occurrence of outbreaks of avian influenza in the Region clearly indicates that it could be severely hit by a human influenza pandemic. Countries in the Region have invested time, funds and effort to increase their level of preparedness for response to avian influenza outbreaks and human pandemic influenza. Cases of avian influenza were detected early and plans for appropriate interventions were ready. However, it was clearly evident that implementation of national preparedness plans is not an easy undertaking and needs a lot of coordination.

The global commitment to preventing a human influenza pandemic is reflected in World Health Assembly resolution WHA58.5, endorsed in 2005, which articulates the need for global action and strengthening of national capacity to respond to the threat of a pandemic. The regional strategy on pandemic influenza preparedness and response is intended to complement the national efforts and enhance the capacity of countries to respond rapidly and effectively in order to pre-empt a human influenza pandemic, as well as to mitigate the misery a full-blown pandemic is likely to inflict on humanity. The strategy underscores the importance of transparency and information sharing. It focuses on strengthening capacities of the Regional Office and Member States to respond in a timely manner to outbreaks of H5N1 infection among humans.

The main goal of this competency-based training activity is to provide adequate, appropriate and timely technical support to enable countries to respond efficiently to a human influenza pandemic so that there will be minimal impact, not only on the health of the nation but also on societal structures. This training is the third course in a series that aims at creating a cadre of well trained and adequately skilled public health professionals readily available to the Organization and the countries for deployment.

This goal is in line with resolution EM/RC52/R.2 on emergency preparedness and response in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, which was issued by the 52nd Session of the Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean in 2005. In that resolution, the Regional Committee encouraged countries to further strengthen national emergency preparedness and response

programmes through legislative, technical, financial and logistical measures. This and forthcoming training activities will provide an excellent forum for participants to share the strengths and weaknesses of responses undertaken by the different countries so far affected by avian influenza. A second component of the course concerns the containment of the pandemic. Containment aims to stop or slow down the spread of pandemic influenza when and where efficient human-to-human transmission is first detected. In addition, the Regional Office is planning to conduct many other specialized courses in selected aspects of the pandemic.

As you will note, we have deliberately brought together groups of diverse but interrelated specialists under one roof. The aim is to strengthen the bridges between you and thus strengthen the national capacities for epidemiological and laboratory surveillance, epidemiological investigation and treatment of human cases; enhance information management, risk assessment and exchange of epidemiological data and specimens; and strengthen support for specimen collection, laboratory diagnosis and virological analysis of influenza A (H5N1).

Following this course, we expect you to train others in your respective countries and serve as members of the Regional response teams.

Dear Colleagues,

I would like to thank you all again, and ask all of you to make the utmost benefit of this training activity through sound discussions, exchange of ideas and clear planning for enhancing the surveillance and preparedness activities to combat Avian Influenza in our region. I wish you all a successful course and a pleasant stay in Lahore, Pakistan.