In the Western Pacific, some foodborne illnesses pose serious public health threats in several Member States and food contamination is common in all countries, even the most developed. In addition, zoonoses continue to provide an emerging threat to human health.

The World Health Assembly has adopted two recent resolutions on food safety calling for greater action by WHO to improve information exchange and to strengthen food control capabilities in Member States. At its fifty-second session in September 2001, the Regional Committee endorsed a regional strategy for food safety, in which better coordination and information sharing were key elements.

It is being increasingly recognized by Member States that the objective of reducing the risk of foodborne disease is achieved most effectively by targeted prevention throughout the production, processing and marketing chain and through greater cooperation and information sharing within and between countries.

The Regional Committee is asked to discuss and endorse the need for:

1. greater international information sharing and cooperative action in food safety;
2. more cooperation amongst ministries, producers, industry and consumers to address food safety throughout the production, processing and marketing chain; and
3. immediate attention to human health aspects and regulatory control of animal husbandry and the marketing of live birds and animals for food and the need for Member States to identify and introduce evidence-based regulatory controls to reduce the burden of emerging zoonoses in markets where live birds and animals are sold for food.

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1 Resolutions WHA53.15 and WHA55.16.
2 Resolution WPR/RC52.R2.
1. CURRENT SITUATION

In the Western Pacific, certain foodborne illnesses (e.g. campylobacteriosis and salmonellosis) pose serious public health threats in several Member States and food contamination is common in all countries, even the most developed. In Australia, for example, three of the ten leading causes of morbidity are foodborne diseases and authorities estimate that about 5.4 million people suffer at least one foodborne disease each year. Foodborne diseases and food contaminations are also frequent in China. In Hong Kong (China), for example, salmonellosis, *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* and hepatitis A infections are frequently reported foodborne diseases, along with ciguatera. Bacterial food poisoning is the fifth largest cause of morbidity in Japan and the leading cause of morbidity in the Northern Mariana Islands. In the Marshall Islands and the Philippines, diarrhoeal diseases (or gastroenteritis and diarrhoeal diseases) are the leading cause of morbidity.

Emerging problems, such as contamination of food with (1) acrylamide, semicarbazide, and chloropropanols, (2) pesticide and veterinary drug residues, (3) marine biotoxins, (4) bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) prions, (5) *Enterobacter sakazakii*, and (6) multidrug-resistant strains of microbial pathogens, are creating additional food safety concerns among both the public and decision-makers. Food exports from several countries in the Western Pacific have suffered from chemical and microbiological contamination and consequent bans from importing countries.

In addition to zoonoses such as salmonellosis and campylobacteriosis, emerging zoonotic diseases such as highly pathogenic avian influenza, Nipah virus and possibly severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) provide emerging threats to human health.

The 2004 outbreaks of highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza in Asia were historically unprecedented in their scale, geographical spread and economic consequences. More than 100 million chickens died or were culled in an attempt to contain the spread of the disease. The number of human cases was small (34 as of 30 June 2004) but the number of deaths was high (23). Nipah virus is another important emerging zoonotic disease. In the outbreak of Nipah virus in Malaysia in 1998-99, 265 people were infected, with a case fatality rate of about 40%. The relationship between SARS and animals considered to be culinary

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4 Ibid.
delicacies in Guangdong, China, and other areas of Asia has not been confirmed, but it seems likely that they have played a role as either the source of the disease or as part of the transmission chain.

2. ISSUES

2.1 Need for greater international information sharing and cooperative action

The rapid globalization of food production and trade has increased the potential for international incidents involving food contaminated with microbial or chemical hazards. As a consequence, food safety authorities all over the world have acknowledged that food safety must be tackled not only at the national level but also through closer links among food safety authorities at international and regional levels.

The importance of reliable and authoritative information on food both to prevent and respond to disease outbreaks and to maintain consumer confidence in the food supply has been recognized at numerous international forums. In May 2000, the Fifty-third World Health Assembly called for WHO to give greater emphasis to food safety. In May 2002, the Fifty-fifth World Health Assembly requested the Director-General to provide tools and support to Member States to increase their capacity to respond to emergencies posed by natural, accidental and intentional contamination of food. At its fifty-second session in September 2001, the Regional Committee endorsed a regional strategy for food safety, in which better coordination and information sharing were key elements. In 2004, the Codex Alimentarius considered and adopted Principles and Guidelines for the Exchange of Information in Food Control Emergency Situations. The ongoing revision of the WHO International Health Regulations envisages the strengthening of information exchange among national authorities through WHO in cases where food products in international trade may pose serious public health risks.

FAO and WHO held a conference on Food Safety for Asia and the Pacific in Seremban, Malaysia, in May 2004. The conference identified the need for an Asian regional foodborne disease surveillance network that would stimulate regional collaboration and cooperation in the monitoring and control of foodborne disease as a priority concern.

5 Resolution WHA53.15.
6 Resolution WHA55.16.
Pacific island countries face specific problems with regard to the implementation of appropriate food safety standards. WHO, in cooperation with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), conducted a consultation on food safety and quality for the Pacific island countries and areas in Nadi, Fiji, in November 2002. A key recommendation concerned the need to develop a regional network that would enable Pacific island countries and areas to cooperate in the establishment of uniform food standards, national food safety risk-assessment systems, and risk-management systems to protect the health of the consumer and facilitate fair and safe trade in food.

In conjunction with the joint meeting with FAO at Seremban, Malaysia, in May 2004 referred to above, FAO, SPC and WHO held a meeting to provide guidance to Pacific island countries on food safety legislation, improving data on food contamination and foodborne diseases in the Pacific and strengthening the competency of food inspectors in the Pacific. These recommendations now need to be translated into action by Pacific island countries. Pacific island countries should establish a strategic regional approach to strengthening their food safety control systems.

In January 2003, WHO published a report on terrorist threats to food. The report identified the need for food safety emergency networks to complement the existing WHO Global Alert and Response (GOAR) Network. The Regional Office communicated with countries and areas in the second quarter of 2004 to invite participation in two networks being established by WHO: an International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN) and a Food Safety Emergency Network (INFO SAN EMERGENCY). INFOSAN will disseminate information about global food safety issues, while INFOSAN EMERGENCY will be used to alert food safety authorities to foodborne disease outbreaks or food contamination events of international significance, including bioterrorism incidents.

The Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Expert Group on Food Safety recently agreed on a number of priority areas for cooperation under a draft ASEAN food safety improvement plan. These included the development of a centre of excellence for food inspection and certification, sharing of expertise regarding consumer participation in food safety, and greater information sharing on food safety through existing national websites or other means of communications.
2.2 Need for greater cooperation within countries to address food safety throughout the production, processing and marketing chain

If the risk of foodborne disease is to be reduced, there needs to be a comprehensive and integrated approach with the producer, processor, vendor and consumer all playing a role. The introduction of preventive measures at relevant stages of the food chain makes better economic sense and is more efficient than taking action after contamination has occurred.

However, greater cooperation among authorities within countries is often hindered by low levels of coordination and cooperation among different government departments involved in developing and enforcing legislation; insufficient legislation addressing food control or excessively complex webs of laws and regulations; or incomplete or variable enforcement of legislation, leaving areas of the food chain inadequately protected.

WHO will continue to work with countries to strengthen national capacity to develop policies, plans of action and legislation to support a comprehensive food control system. Guidance on strengthening national systems is provided in the FAO/WHO publication Assuring food safety and quality – guidelines for strengthening food control systems, 2003.

2.3 Human health aspects of the marketing of live birds and animals for food

Avian influenza is potentially a zoonosis of pandemic proportions. For several decades, the role of wet markets where live birds and animals are sold for food has been recognized as a key part of the transmission and epidemiology of such viruses. These markets have also been implicated as a potential source of SARS and other zoonoses. Yet in Asia such wet markets remain extremely popular and are largely unregulated or poorly regulated. Birds and animals are slaughtered under unhygienic conditions and faeces, feathers and aerosols consequently contaminate the environment, people and food in the market. Appropriate regulations are needed to reduce the potential for emerging zoonoses in markets where live birds and animals are sold for food. Such regulation should aim to put in place better transportation of animals to the market; greater surveillance before and in the marketplace; improved hygiene and sanitation in the marketplace; better segregation of different species of domestic and wild animals and birds; and appropriate conditions of slaughter.

In order to combat the risk of influenza and other emerging zoonoses, WHO is working with FAO and the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) with a view to strengthening risk-based regulatory frameworks and ensuring they are enforced in relation to the marketing
of live birds and animals for food. The three organizations will work together to share experiences on emerging diseases which appear to be zoonotic in origin; learn from each other regarding current policy, regulatory and enforcement environments related to the marketing of live birds and animals for food; identify the potential human health risks of current practices; assess the evidence base for current regulatory control measures affecting marketing of animals and food from animals; provide guidance on regulatory controls for marketplaces that are applicable to developing countries; and identify research that needs to be undertaken to strengthen the evidence base for such regulatory controls.

The zoonotic nature of several of the important outbreak-prone emerging diseases that have recently emerged makes close collaboration between health ministries and those responsible for agriculture and trade essential. Support for regulatory control of animal husbandry and the marketing of live birds and animals for food will be an integral part of WHO's response to zoonotic outbreak-prone emerging diseases in its South-East Asia and Western Pacific Regions.

3. ACTIONS PROPOSED

The following actions by Member States are proposed for consideration by the Regional Committee:

(1) improve information sharing and cooperative action in relation to food safety at international and regional levels;

(2) ensure there is greater cooperation among ministries, producers, industry and consumers to address food safety throughout the production, processing and marketing chain;

(3) pay immediate attention to human health aspects and regulatory control of animal husbandry and the marketing of live birds and animals for food and introduce evidence-based regulatory control mechanisms to reduce the burden of emerging zoonoses in markets where live birds and animals are sold for food.