



GLOBAL OVERVIEW: AVIAN INFLUENZA SITUATION AND USAID INTERVENTIONS

THE CURRENT SITUATION

The re-emergence in late 2003 of the H5N1 avian influenza virus as a highly pathogenic virus capable of infecting both poultry and humans raised immediate concerns about the threat of a global pandemic. Beginning in late 2005, the virus swept out of its original focus in Southeast Asia and across Eurasia, Europe, South Asia, the Near East, and Africa, dramatically signaling the start of an even more dangerous phase in the virus' evolution. To date, animal outbreaks have been reported in 65 countries, and 15 countries have confirmed human cases. A total of 387 humans have been infected resulting in 245 deaths (case fatality rate: 63 percent). Since its emergence, the virus has continued to mutate and become increasingly more pathogenic. The increase in outbreaks of highly pathogenic avian influenza in birds and humans since the beginning of 2007 has heightened concerns about the emergence and spread of a viral mutation that could spark a human pandemic.

SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS

In the face of these alarming developments, there has been notable progress made since the beginning of 2006 in response to the avian influenza threat. Progress has been particularly significant in the case of Vietnam and Thailand, two of the most affected countries. During a two-year span between late 2003 and 2005, these two countries accounted for a total of 3,319 reported outbreaks of avian influenza among birds (88 percent of the global total). In 2006, after introducing an aggressive package of control measures, total animal outbreaks fell to 209 (29 percent of the global total). On the human health side, results are equally remarkable: during the 2003-05 period, Vietnam and Thailand recorded 115 human cases (78 percent of the global total), but in 2006 there were just three total human cases (less than 3 percent of the worldwide total). An upsurge in outbreaks in recent months in both countries, however, underscores the explosive nature of the virus and the need for sustained vigilance.

Even in the case of other countries infected in 2006, there has been noted progress. Compared to a year ago, the current "influenza season" has involved fewer outbreaks and infected far fewer poultry. While there are many factors that may be contributing to this shift, there has been tremendous progress in strengthening "early-warning surveillance" and rapid response capacities in affected countries over the past year.

As a result of these efforts, we are hearing about avian influenza outbreaks sooner and are thus better able to launch more effective and timely responses. In many places, the time lapse between the onset of an outbreak and its being reported has been reduced from typically three to five weeks to 48 hours. Similarly, we are getting faster laboratory confirmation, which enables us to mount more successful mitigation measures. Intensive communications campaigns have also made communities more aware of the risks they face by improper rearing or handling of poultry, leading to more appropriate practices at the household level and earlier reports of outbreaks. Collectively, these measures have played an important role in limiting the size and spread of outbreaks.

MAJOR CHALLENGES REMAIN

These successes have dramatically illustrated the effectiveness of the "package" of interventions being used for controlling the spread of avian influenza, particularly in large and medium-size commercial poultry farms, which generally have been able to undertake the actions needed to improve biosecurity and protect their birds from future infections. What has emerged as the greatest single challenge to effective control of the spread of this virus, however, is the more informal poultry settings characterized as "backyard farms." In 2006 (and so far in 2007), nearly all newly reported outbreaks have been among these small holdings. From Indonesia to Nigeria, it is the small poultry holdings of individual families – which on average range from 12 to 50 birds – that account for anywhere from 30 to 70 percent of the poultry in a country.

While economic self-interest and access to resources has proven critical in motivating the larger commercial farms to take action, it has proven far more difficult to transform the way small farm holders rear their poultry. These small farm holders largely fall into the lowest economic quintiles, with poultry farming making significant contributions to household nutrition and livelihood. A combination of poverty, entrenched “traditional” practices, and lack of clear understanding about the risks posed by avian influenza have proven significant challenges in applying an effective package of biosecurity measures.

In 2007, we will be bringing particular attention to meeting this challenge. In Indonesia, we have partnered with the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to develop a highly successful community-based model for improving virus surveillance and the containment of outbreaks. With its focus on “backyard” farms, we anticipate this model will have a significant role in protecting small rural holdings in many of the countries in which we are working.

In the coming year, we will also be placing much greater emphasis on developing plans and capabilities to respond to a global human influenza pandemic. Recent analysis of past global pandemics has led key international experts to predict that in the event of a pandemic, greater than 95 percent of the global death toll will occur in the developing world. We will be working closely with the U.N. and other U.S. Government partners to develop standard operating procedures and protocols for addressing both the health and non-health aspects of a humanitarian response and will be training “first responders” in their application. Special emphasis will be placed on building an international network of NGOs, private- and public-sector providers, and international donors that will be drawn upon to deliver a humanitarian response in the event of a global pandemic.



G. Macgregor-Skinner/USAID

A team of U.S. Government and local health experts dressed in personal protective equipment (PPE) use decontamination spray after investigating an outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1 in wild birds and domestic poultry in Turkey, January 2006.

USAID ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Over the past two years, USAID has responded to the avian influenza threat by expanding its avian influenza assistance to include 55 countries and regional programs in all the priority and at-risk regions and by providing aggressive U.S. leadership in support of a comprehensive international response.

To date, USAID has committed a total of \$191,650,000 for avian influenza efforts worldwide. Congress is currently considering a FY07 Supplemental Request that includes an additional \$161,000,000 for USAID. If appropriated, these funds will be invested to consolidate USAID's ongoing successes, to expand the geographic focus of activities required to stop the spread of the virus, and to strengthen global readiness to respond to a possible global pandemic.