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Economic and Social Council Special Event:
The Avian Flu
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Mr. President, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you very much for the opportunity to address you.

My message to you today is: FAO believes that eliminating Avian Influenza among poultry can delay or prevent the transformation of the H5N1 virus into a form that would create a human pandemic.

This is the good news: we can act at source to reduce poultry virus exposure to humans. The bad news, in a way, is that we must act now. There is little time to lose in what is an extremely complex problem. Let me give you some background on the dynamics of world poultry and bird ecology in Eurasia.

Population growth, urbanization and the rise of incomes increase the demand for animal protein at an exponential rate. Annual growth of the poultry sector now exceeds five percent. Poultry bird population stands at 18 billion today.

The developments in Asia have been particularly dynamic. Domestic duck populations in China and Vietnam together comprise 78 percent of the world duck population and have increased three-fold over the past two decades. It is important to note that this has been a development taking place in less than 0.5 percent of the earth's terrestrial surface. This concentration of over one billion ducks and geese, many of which are kept in open systems, has provided an effective breeding ground for the myriad of avian influenza viruses circulating in the wild waterfowl pool.

With the increase of virus circulation in Asian poultry there have been numerous events of spillover. Apart from the worrisome infections and fatalities in humans, the virus also infected cats and tigers. More recently, the H5N1 virus made its way back into wild spring birds, as evidenced in the spring of 2005 when high mortality in wild birds was observed in eastern China and Mongolia. Outbreaks in wild birds and poultry followed, coinciding with the return of wild birds to their summer breeding grounds in Siberia.

The emergence of a Eurasian epidemic started in summer 2005 when wild birds arriving from many different directions and geographical areas all met in the West Siberian Lowland. The persistence of virus in cold water contaminated with faeces of infected birds permitted the redistribution of the cold tolerant H5N1 virus among birds of different migration routes. This redistribution explains the encroachment by H5N1 of Europe and we have predicted that it may spread throughout the Middle East, North Africa, East and West Africa. Indeed, whilst the poultry disease can be brought under control wherever adequate means and tools are made available, this is not true for the containment of virus circulation in wild birds. The West Siberian Lowlands and the East Siberian Baikal Lake Area are home of many Eurasian migratory waterfowl species and seasonal bird migration secures a sustained distribution of many different avian influenza viruses across Eurasia. The emphasis is on tracking wild birds and virus spread rather than on virus containment in these populations. While these events have so far been confined to Asia and now extend to Europe, there is no reason to think other parts of the world including the Americas are excluded from the process of bird flu globalization.

The disease has to be contained at source i.e. in domestic poultry from where transmission to humans occurs. We believe this is possible. Yes, the world is vulnerable and this kind of transboundary problem is exactly what justifies the collaboration of technical agencies in the UN. FAO works closely with WHO, OIE, WB countries and our approach hinges on collaboration, information and transparency (disease tracking, sharing virus strains, and strengthen national veterinary services). We welcome the UN Coordination Arrangement put in place by the Secretary-General and led by Dr. David Nabarro.

To combat avian flu at its source, FAO insists on a multi-pronged approach:
1) implement biosecurity measures aimed at preventing the disease;
2) improve the disease surveillance and detection; and
3) once detected, to control the disease and to limit its spread.

There are proven practices for this, such as isolating poultry, good farm hygiene, use of effective vaccines, close monitoring, and quick culling when necessary. These practices work, and there are success stories in many countries. FAO has been providing advice on how to apply these practices, offering training courses, developing guidelines and manuals, helping to equip veterinary laboratories, accessing vaccines, and assisting countries in the design of prevention and control strategies. More research is needed to find easier ways to administer the virus and to understand the virus' behaviour.

We work with regional networks for improving surveillance and diagnosis and for exchanging information on the occurrence of the disease and on lessons learned. FAO and OIE have jointly appealed to governments to improve the exchange of viral strains and this seems to be improving.

Finally, we work to provide correct technical information globally and to advocate for an international campaign against the disease and assist the public in understanding and reaching adequately - risk communication essential. In very close partnership with OIE and WHO, we have developed a Global Strategy for the Progressive Control of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI).

To conclude, we estimate that in the worst case scenario, about US$ 425 million are needed to combat the disease in all counties at risk. Of this half would be for preparedness. Only US$ 30 million have been received or pledged so far and I would like to acknowledge the support from Australia, France, Germany, Japan, Netherlands, Switzerland and USA. FAO has already mobilized over US$ 7.5 million from its own funds.

My message is still one of optimism; we can and must do something now. Let me emphasize that in times that pathogens such as the bird flu virus cross the animal-human species barrier, the moment has come for humankind to cross cultural, political and scientific barriers.