

Middle East Regional Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Coordination Meeting

A Middle East Consortium on Infectious Disease Surveillance (MECIDS) coordination meeting on avian influenza preparedness was held at Search for Common Ground office in Jerusalem on March 27th, 2006 with participation from the Palestinian, Jordanian, Israeli Ministries of Health, WHO for West Bank/Gaza, a representative from the Egyptian Embassy in Israel, a representative from the Ministry of foreign affairs, and a representative from the state of Israel health coordination and liaison office.

The purpose of the meeting was to bring the Palestinian, Israeli and Jordanian Ministries of Health to share information regarding the current situation of avian influenza in this region, to discuss current issues of cooperation, coordination, or assistance among the ministries, as well as to identify concrete immediate next steps required to improve the region's response to avian influenza.

At the meeting each of the Palestinian, Israeli, and Jordanian Ministry of Health representatives gave a briefing on the current situation in their area and how there are managing the containment of the virus in their affected farms.

An Israeli Ministry of Health representative briefed on the current situation in Israel and how the H5N1 virus has spread in 6 locations of poultry farms in the southern part of Israel which killed about 20,000 turkeys. The official explained that out of 44 million poultry in Israel 1.2 million were culled to prevent the spread of the virus. The health official also explained that they have given Personal Protective Equipments (PPE), and Tami Flu to the farmers who have been in direct contact with the poultry to make sure that the virus does not spread, as well as compensating farmers for the culling of their poultry.

A health official from Jordan briefed that the virus had been confirmed in a back yard small turkey farm in a small village in the north of Jordan. The health official explained that 2 laboratory tests were done to confirm the H5N1 virus of which the results gave a strange analysis; the tests were done both at the agriculture and the health ministry laboratories. The official explained that the first laboratory test which was the Rapid test gave negative for H5N1, but the second (PCR) test confirmed positive for the H5N1 virus. The health official explained that they have started to take preventive measures in that affected area, were they culled about 20,000 poultry within the area of 3km, examined all poultry farmers in that area to see if they had been infected with the virus, and repeated rapid testing to confirm the absence of the virus.

The Palestinian Ministry of Health representative showed concerns about the weak surveillance system in the Palestinian Territory to monitor the development and the spread of the virus in the area, as well as the lack of funds and equipments to contain this virus. The representative explained that if the virus was not properly contained within the territory it will differently spread to other areas in the region. The Ministry of Health

official said that the virus appeared in Gaza in two locations; however no cases have been confirmed in the West Bank. The official explained that their plan is to cull all poultry in Gaza and transfer slaughtered frozen poultry from the West Bank. The official explained that there was a total of 2.5 million poultry in Gaza which needs to be culled. The official briefed that the culling process have started, but will need a lot more financial and technical support to contain the virus.

The Egyptian representative briefed about the situation in Egypt in terms of avian influenza, he explained that the virus H5N1 has been confirmed in 19 governorates and confirmed that the virus have affected five humans of which one have died from the virus, two were cured, one is still hospitalized and the last is still in an inspection phase.

A WHO representative for West Bank and Gaza showed concerns that if all poultry were to be culled in Gaza and the fact that the poultry products are the primary source of protein intake this could lead to nutrition problems.

The three Health Ministries at the meeting agreed this was a serious issue and need to take immediate steps to prevent the disease from spreading and causing more damage to the region.

After all the briefings about, all three Ministries agreed that they need to work together to prevent a humanitarian disaster and this should be a regional effort to combat this virus. The Ministries recommended an immediate meeting with international agencies to discuss this regional humanitarian problem that would put all three nations at risk if the virus is not contained properly.