

Palestinian and Israeli coordination meeting on avian influenza
March 19th, 2006

Palestinian and Israeli Health officials met in Jerusalem's Public Health Services office on Sunday March 19th, 2006 to discuss the recent avian influenza outbreak that hit four poultry farms in southern Israel by that date. The source of the outbreak had not yet been determined, and the Israeli Ministry of Health were investigating to see how the disease reached the country. Palestinian health officials were concerned that the outbreak will transfer to the Palestinian territory through illegal transfer of poultry (as well as through migratory birds). Palestinian Health officials declared that they are ready for real time coordination with the Israeli Ministry of Health to prevent the spread of avian influenza all over the country.

At the meeting, Israeli health officials briefed the Palestinian health delegation on the current situation in the affected Israeli farms and on preventative measures being taken to quarantine the disease from spreading to other farms. Israeli health officials explained that at the beginning of their investigation, officials thought that this was due to the regular Newcastle disease that hits poultry, but then discovered that the symptoms were far more shocking in which chickens stopped eating and within 10-12 hours the poultry were falling dead in huge masses. Immediate laboratory tests were done which confirmed the deadly H5N1 virus. An Israeli Health official explained the track of the infected farms in southern Israel on a Geographical Information Systems (GIS) Map, and also explained the preventive measures taken within each area, he explained that within 3-kilometers of the infected area, all poultry must be slaughtered, and within 10-kilometers of the infected area, quarantine was imposed, meaning no one can eat, purchase any poultry within that area. They also discussed that full compensation was given to farmers of the affected areas.

Israeli Health officials also showed major concerns of the public's reaction to this matter and how their illogical ways of boycotting all poultry products could lead to an economic problem. Israeli health officials also confirmed that the four farmers that were hospitalized for the suspected avian influenza virus were free from the virus.

The Palestinian delegation expressed concerns regarding the illegal transfer of poultry that took place in Yatta village near Hebron and stated that they are willing to cooperate and coordinate on a technical and administrative level with the Israelis to prevent a real crisis from occurring. Officials said that this is a real concern that could lead to a major crisis if the virus spread in the Palestinian territory, and they said that at this time the Palestinian territory is not technically and financially ready to combat such a virus if it were to spread within the territory. And they made a clear statement that both Palestinian and Israeli Ministries of Health should equally and jointly work together to combat against this lethal virus.

Israeli health officials said that this threat should be turned into an opportunity for Palestinian/Israeli cooperation.

At the meeting both Israeli and Palestinian health officials stated that this issue could cause an economical and humanitarian disaster, and both Ministries need to work together to insure the security and safety of their public.

The participants made the following recommendations for action:

1. To enable Palestinian personnel to travel throughout the West Bank to inspect poultry farms.
2. To request that the Israeli Ministry of Health lend small quantity of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to Palestinian poultry inspectors. These PPE will be returned to Israel after the Palestinian Ministry of Health receives PPE promised by donors.
3. To request that the Israeli Ministry of Health provide a small amount of Tamiflu to the Palestinian Ministry of Health
4. For Palestinian and Israeli Ministries of Health to work together on educating their public regarding this serious issue, in particular to develop
 - Public messaging concerning the consumption of poultry products
 - Increased awareness of the danger of illegal poultry transfers (either sales of live birds or dumping of dead birds)
5. For Palestinian and Israeli Ministries of Health to engage other ministries as needed to halt the illegal transfer of poultry
6. To convene ongoing coordination meetings between the two Ministries of Health to follow up on the development of this issue.