



OFFICE OF THE WHO REPRESENTATIVE IN THE SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIET NAM
BUREAU DU REPRESENTANT DE L'OMS EN REPUBLIQUE SOCIALISTE DU VIET NAM
P.O. Box 52, Hanoi, Viet Nam

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Prière de rappeler la référence: ICP-CSR/AI- G

His Excellency Phan Van Khai
Prime Minister
of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam
Government Office of Viet Nam

28 January 2004

Dear Sir,

We, Representatives of the Food and Agriculture Organization, the Office International des Epizooties and the World Health Organization in Viet Nam present our compliments to you and our greetings for the New Year. Following the recent visit of Dr Omi Regional Director of the WHO in Hanoi and his meeting with Deputy Prime Minister Pham Gia Khiem, we would like to congratulate you for the actions taken by your government in relation to the avian flu outbreak but also to raise our concerns about the situation and propose an increased collaboration between your government and our organizations.

As you know, H5N1 is an avian influenza virus that usually infects only birds. Since a few months, H5N1 viruses are circulating widely among poultry in Viet Nam, many provinces have been affected in the North and in the South of the country and already a large number of birds have died or have been slaughtered. Other Asian countries experience the same situation: Japan, South Korea, and Thailand to name only a few. Large numbers of poultry died and there are increasing numbers of human infections and deaths. We are, therefore extremely preoccupied by the problems posed by the avian flu in birds and the need to stop the outbreak very promptly; equally we are also concerned by the public health implications of the H5N1 situation in Viet Nam.

Currently, H5N1 viruses have only a limited ability to infect humans. Yet their continued circulation in Vietnam is increasing the possibility for these viruses to gain the ability to easily infect and transmit among people. If this occurs, it is expected H5N1 viruses will spread rapidly (within weeks to months) worldwide in a pandemic (i.e., global outbreak of influenza). The implications of an H5N1 pandemic are enormous because H5N1 is one of the world's deadliest viruses. At a minimum, its global spread would be expected to result in several tens of thousands of deaths in Vietnam and several millions of deaths worldwide. The social, economic and health impact would be much greater than SARS.

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cc: - Hon. Prof Tran Thi Trung Chien, Minister of Health in Viet Nam
- Hon. Mr Le Huy Ngo, Minister of Agriculture and and Rural Development in Viet Nam

Influenza pandemics are widely feared because they can be associated with large numbers of illnesses and deaths. For example, the most severe pandemic of the 20th Century took place in 1918 and led, according to the most conservative estimates, to more than 20 million deaths within one year. Although two other pandemics in 1957 and 1968 caused fewer deaths, a high percentage of the deaths in all three pandemics occurred among young people. Based on the experience with human H5N1 infections in Hong Kong and Vietnam, an H5N1 pandemic would be expected to be severe and cause many deaths.

As for SARS, a very rapid and comprehensive response is critical if the H5N1 situation in Viet Nam is to be brought under control. FAO, OIE, WHO and other international organizations are willing to provide Vietnam with extensive assistance.

We request your support for the initiative of Deputy Prime Minister Pham Gia Khiem:

- To set up an inter-sectoral H5N1 response steering committee, which should provide advice to technical staff based on sound assessment of scientific and public health issues, and allows close and daily communication and coordination between Vietnamese medical and veterinary authorities.
- To encourage Government officials to work closely with the experts from FAO, OIE and WHO on all investigative and control activities.

Fighting this new threat to the economy and public health in Vietnam requires great determination, fortitude and support. We pledge to stand by you and support you in your efforts to contain this disaster for agriculture production and this new danger for human health in the world.

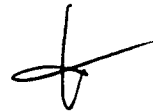
Please accept, Sir, the assurance of our highest consideration.



Mrs Pascale Brudon
WHO Representative in VTN



Mr Anton Rychener
FAO Representative in VTN



Mr Bernard Vallat
Office International des
Epizooties, Paris