Meeting on Avian Influenza in Thailand

Message from Dr Bernard Vallat
Director General of the OIE

I would like first of all to thank the Government of Thailand for having invited me and given me the opportunity to underline the importance of this vital initiative not only for Thailand but for the whole region.

I deeply regret being unable to attend personally due to the short notice and other pressing commitments which could not be cancelled. I have therefore asked Dr Fujita, the Representative of the OIE Regional Representation for Asia, Middle East and Oceania to represent our organisation and to read this message on my behalf.

Our organisation has been mandated by its 166 Member Countries to play a key role in the control and eradication of animal diseases across the world including those which are transmissible to humans.

We have the responsibility first of all to inform all our Member Countries of the situation concerning animal diseases as well as zoonoses. It is therefore important to have daily information on where the diseases are occurring in order to apply control measures and for other countries to use this information to protect themselves against those diseases.

We have been mandated by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) as the sole international organisation for setting standards, guidelines and recommendations governing the sanitary safety of international trade in animals and animal products (meat, eggs, milk etc...). These norms are developed by world-renown scientists and adopted by the OIE International Committee during the annual General Session. They are used by importing countries to protect themselves from introduction of animal diseases while at the same time avoiding unjustified trade barriers.

Finally, we benefit from a world-wide network of expertise from over 160 Reference laboratories and Collaborating Centres which assist Member Countries in the control and eradication of animal diseases. However, these measures tend to vary depending on local conditions. In fact, nobody can pretend that the same control measures can be applied everywhere. For example, exporting countries may not be willing to apply the same strategies as those countries which do not wish to export.
The crisis currently affecting Asia is unprecedented. Never had the spread of avian influenza affected so many countries or regions. We can already say that we are witnessing a real disaster for animal production in your region. This crisis carries with it a potentially serious danger to the whole human population if this animal virus happens to transform itself into a virus transmissible from humans to humans. The best way to prevent this from happening is to eliminate as rapidly as possible the animal reservoir at source in the farms and in the villages.

The first urgent action is therefore to know exactly where the infected animals are located. For that, the need is to develop a central state network of surveillance which can only be possible thanks to the omnipresence of the official veterinary services which should be equipped with all necessary resources to accomplish this work. They should also be empowered to provide an independent and transparent reporting system for animal diseases for the whole country. The state should also ensure that all sick animals are destroyed and breeders, especially the small ones, compensated to enlist their cooperation.

Control of movements of animals and their products from infected to free zones is also a crucial point that requires regional cooperation between neighbouring countries affected by the disease.

These traditional methods are the most effective for eradicating the disease but may prove ineffective if we face very extensive outbreaks. In such cases, vaccination may be applied to protect unaffected zones but the large scale application of vaccination requires much time and resources and costs are high.

In any case, the OIE is prepared to collaborate with other international organisations particularly, the FAO and WHO to provide technical support to all Member Countries which require assistance in the following fields:

- Notification and surveillance of animal diseases
- Control measures including humane killing and carcass disposal relevant methods,
- Policy measures to be adopted by exporting countries such as Thailand which would like to resume exports of poultry and poultry products as soon as possible.

We should keep in mind that the situation is extremely serious and necessitates a lot of political willingness as is nicely demonstrated by the present meeting, and huge resources. This situation will require several months before the ultimate aim is achieved. I wish to assure you that the OIE will assist you and will do the best to convince the international community of the urgency of supporting your country in order to face together this new challenge.

I thank you for your attention.

Bernard Vallat