

The emergence of avian flu as a challenge to human health is clearly a reflection of major changes taking place in the environment, underlined by Shafqat Kakakhel, Deputy-Executive-Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) on the occasion of the International Pledging Conference on Avian and Human Influenza in Beijing (17-18.1.2006). The conference will assess the financing needs of countries and regions, and explore how these needs can be met.

Avian flu is not the only one disease with an environmental health background - a startling number of similar vector-born diseases have emerged in recent years - Lassa, SARS, Ebola, Marburg and recently the threat of an avian flu pandemic. A common factor is that such diseases evolve when humans intensively interact with the natural environment.

"We know that migratory birds may be one vector, but they are not the cause of avian flu. Nor are they likely to be the only vector", underlined Shafqat Kakakhel.

Human-induced movements of poultry, or captured wild or captive-bred birds, and of humans themselves, seem to be an equal or greater threat. Live animal markets which facilitate millions of potential cross-infections are also a major but, until recently, less recognized threat.

"This is why we must rise to the global health challenge of avian flu. What can we do on the environmental front to complement the human medical and research response?" He underlined the need for support in answering key questions, such as:

- How does the flu virus behave in wild birds that catch it, and how long can it survive in the aquatic habitats that are breeding, staging and non-breeding (wintering) grounds for the birds?

- Which migratory routes and specific locations can we pinpoint as posing the highest levels of risk both to and from migrating birds, including globally threatened species?

"By answering these and other questions the environmental community should be able to complement the developing of a global surveillance or "early warning" system" on avian flu, he said. UNEP HQ and the Secretariat of the UNEP-based Convention on Migratory Species have already begun to work towards such a system, taking advantage of the Scientific Task Force on Avian Flu, which was set up last year by CMS and several other inter-governmental and NGO bodies.

"The real danger is complacency. In fact, we have never been in a better position to consolidate our previous gains and to move on to add health, wealth and a better environment to our world," concluded UNEP's Deputy Executive Director.

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