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HPAI Technical Advisor, Timor Leste

In December 2005, the IRPC subcontracting to GRM International BV, provided an expert to assist the FAO in their role as a member of the National Task Force for Avian Influenza in Timor-Leste. The role of the Task Force was to prepare a Preparedness and Response Plan for Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI). Although Timor-Leste is currently free from HPAI, the disease is endemic in most provinces of Indonesia (the country's nearest neighbour with which it shares a land border). Timor-Leste is also a special case because of farming systems that include close contact between people, poultry and swine.

South-East and East Asian countries have been severely affected by highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) for more than two years following the emergence of a new virulent strain of virus in southern China in 1996 and its subsequent spread in the region from 2003 onwards. On past precedents it is understood that the intimate contact between livestock (poultry and swine) and people in parts of Asia creates a favourable situation for the evolution of a human pandemic strain. The current strain of the virus (designated H5N1 by virtue of the characterisation of surface markers) has already demonstrated its ability to infect and kill people (it has been fatal in approximately 50 per cent of people who have tested positive for the disease). To date, there is limited evidence of person-to-person transmission and swine and other affected mammals appear to be only incidentally infected, playing no significant role in virus transmission. However, this situation could change rapidly and the emergence, by recombination or mutation, of a highly pathogenic strain of influenza which could transmit rapidly between people to cause a global pandemic is a matter of international concern. Clearly the most effective means of protecting human welfare would be to effectively combat the precursor virus in its avian hosts, thus pre-empting appearance of a pandemic strain.

The main outcome of the project was to facilitate the implementation of a Preparedness, Prevention and Response Plan for Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza in Animals in Timor-Leste, working with the Task Force for Avian Influenza in Timor Leste. The Chairperson to the Task Force for Avian Influenza in Timor-Leste is the Vice-Minister for Health and the Co-Chairperson is the Vice-Minister for Forestry and Coffee. Members of the task force include representatives of: the Ministry of Health; MAFP; Ministry of Planning and Finance (Customs Division); Ministry of Transportation, Communication and Public Works; Ministry of the Interior; the East Timor Medical Association; FAO, WHO and UNOTIL Clinic Services.

The consultant assisted the Task Force to facilitate:

- Development of a manual on the prevention and control of HPAI for Veterinarians and District Livestock Officers in Timor-Leste;
- Development and revision of improved village and small-scale poultry production strategies and programs that mitigate risk and support the prevention and control of HPAI;
- Training of government livestock and NGO staff;
- Active surveillance for HPAI in the border districts;
- A simulation exercise; and

- Studies related to the societal aspects of disease control, including social and economic impact of disease and its control, development of compensation mechanisms, market chain surveys and developing practical standards for live bird and wet markets.
- Prepare a three year project on HPAI preparedness, prevention and control in Timor-Leste in collaboration with the Livestock Directorate and national consultants.