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Avian Influenza Project, Lao PDR

In March 2005, The IRPC, subcontracting to GRM International BV of The Netherlands, provided an International Expert on Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) to work as a short term technical advisor to assist the FAO representative in their role in the decentralized team of the Emergency Centre for Transboundary Animal Diseases (ECTAD) in Lao PDR. The IRPC consultant was responsible for assisting the FAO Representative in the coordination and linkage of various financial, technical and material support to the AI Programme.

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 A 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 consultant assisted the FAO Representative in the coordination and linkage of the various financial, technical and material support related to Avian influenza programme and provided the FAO representative with technical expertise and guidance on animal health and avian influenza issues, including collaborating on the review and preparation of technical reports, project concept notes, proposals and briefing documents and related information on avian influenza. The consultant also ensured general supervision and coordination of project activities, participated and facilitated national technical meetings, workshops and training sessions on Avian Influenza with government groups and the donor community and multilateral agencies, and submitted a final technical report on completion of the task to AGAH/TCEO, FAO Headquarters.

Considerable attention was given to the review and suggestions for improvement to information, education and communication material relating to the prevention and control of Avian Influenza, which will facilitate the development of the most effective program to control avian influenza in Lao PDR.