

THE SCOTSMAN

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## Experts reveal bird flu battle-plan

SEAN YOONG IN KUALA LUMPUR

UNITED Nations agencies and health experts yesterday unveiled a multi-pronged strategy against bird flu, calling for Asian governments to overhaul backyard farming practices and vaccinate poultry to prevent the disease from becoming a human pandemic.

The job is hard, "but we are not powerless", Dr Shigeru Omi of the World Health Organisation said at the end of a conference of animal, health and food experts tasked with combating avian influenza.

The plan, hammered out after three days of deliberations, "gives us a real chance to make a mark on history as long as we work together with maximum energy and commitment", Mr Omi said.

The three-day conference in Malaysia was organised by WHO, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the World Organisation for Animal Health, known as OIE.

Since 2003, tens of million of chickens have died of bird flu or have been slaughtered in east and south-east Asia.

At least 54 people have also died in Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia, most of them after coming into contact with infected birds.

The UN plan focuses on educating small-time farmers and their families about the risk of living in close proximity with animals, and of combining various species such as chickens, ducks and pigs in one enclosure.

Health experts say such practices increase the danger of the avian flu virus moving from one species to another and possibly mutating into a new strain more easily transmitted between humans than the current H5N1 virus.

The virus currently appears to spread to people mainly when they come into close contact with sick poultry.

Medical experts fear a mutated form could trigger a global pandemic.

"We agreed that it is vital to urgently change or even end a number of farming practices that are dangerous to humans," Joseph Domenech, FAO's chief veterinary officer, said. Governments should pursue the vaccination of poultry flocks in high-risk areas and compensate or reward farmers to encourage them to report suspected bird flu outbreaks and to practise safety measures.



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Delegates also expressed concern about the open vegetable and meat markets of Asia, where animals are often slaughtered in unsanitary conditions.

This threatens the health of humans who are exposed to contaminated blood, faeces, feathers and carcasses, the statement said.

"The meeting agreed that the avian influenza situation in Asia is extremely serious, but determined that there was still a window of opportunity to ward off a pandemic," it said.

The three UN agencies will organise a meeting of international donors by the end of 2005 to convince richer countries in the West to commit at least \$250 million (£140 million) to help bird flu-affected nations over the next three years, Mr Omi said.

About \$150 million is required by the WHO for public health programmes including public education, vaccine development, anti-viral drugs, personal protective equipment for people and improving laboratories.

The remaining \$100 million is needed by the FAO and OIE for surveillance and vaccination.

"Without international support, poor countries will not be able to battle bird flu.

"What this action plan will cost is nothing compared with the financial and economic consequences of an influenza pandemic," Mr Omi added.

### Web links

- [Dept of Health - pandemic flu](http://www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/EmergencyPlanning/PandemicFlu/fs/en)  
<http://www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/EmergencyPlanning/PandemicFlu/fs/en>
- [WHO - Bird Flu fact sheet](http://www.who.int/csr/don/2004_01_15/en/)  
[http://www.who.int/csr/don/2004\\_01\\_15/en/](http://www.who.int/csr/don/2004_01_15/en/)

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