



IUF Briefing Paper: Avian Influenza (H5N1) and Agricultural Workers October 2005

I believe that the momentum that is now building up will give us a chance to change the course of history and head off a pandemic caused by the H5N1 virus.

– Shigeru Omi, World Health Organization Regional Director for the Western Pacific, Manila, October 14, 2005

1. Introduction

As the Asian region suffers its second major outbreak of **avian influenza (H5N1)** or “**bird flu**” since 1997, and with the first cases of infected birds confirmed in Europe, there are growing fears of a global pandemic. The total number of reported deaths among humans since the first reports of human infection in December 2003 is 60, mainly in Southeast Asia. In the period since 1997, when H5N1 infection was first found in chickens in Hong Kong, tens of millions of domestic fowl (ducks, chickens and geese) and wild birds have been destroyed in attempts to contain the outbreak.

Described as a “biological time bomb” in the media, there is now evidence that a more deadly form of the H5N1 virus has developed, increasing the risk that it will become a virus that can be transmitted from human to human. Added to this is the discovery of the virus in wild bird populations that migrate across continents.

There are also indications that new forms of H5N1 are carried in birds without producing any physical appearance of illness. This means that visual identification of sick birds (the most common means of surveillance used so far) may become impossible.

As international media attention shifts to the discovery of H5N1 in migratory birds and the risks posed by new strains of H5N1 that can be passed from human to human, there remains an urgent need to address the immediate problem faced by those engaged directly in the farming and processing of poultry. Small farmers, agricultural workers and poultry processing workers face a high risk of infection. Where virus outbreaks have occurred, small farmers and workers have also suffered the economic impact of the death or culling of poultry flocks and the drop in sales of eggs and processed poultry.

Clearly the growing “bird flu” crisis is of immediate concern to IUF affiliates, particularly agricultural unions. What is also of concern is the fact that

international action plans and guidelines currently used to respond to H5N1 do not recognize or make provisions for agricultural workers.

2. Agricultural workers are not recognized in international action plans & guidelines on H5N1

In the past two years, international agencies such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) have released several sets of guidelines and action plans for national governments.

Many of the proposed measures include major changes to poultry farming practices and reorganization of the industry that will have a significant effect on agricultural workers and poultry processing workers. At the same time, none of these action plans seriously address the interests and well-being of processing workers or agricultural workers employed in poultry farming.

An example of this is the *New Strategic Action Recommendations on Avian Influenza (H5N1)* released by WHO's Communicable Disease Surveillance and Response (CSR) on 2 September 2005. The *Recommendations* observe that many outbreaks may be "silent" and go unreported for economic reasons. In affected countries, national governments may not report suspected and actual cases of H5N1 because of the potential economic losses that may result if farmers are compensated. This silence also arises from the fact that farmers are worried about financial losses incurred by quarantine and culling and the lack of compensation.

However, another far greater silence concerns large-scale poultry breeding companies. Reports suggest that companies are undermining surveillance and reporting of H5N1 in order to safeguard their profits. As recent news reports revealed in Indonesia, government inspectors whose responsibility it is to implement H5N1 surveillance are refused entry to large scale poultry operations, including those of the Thai-based transnational corporation, C.P., which is one of the largest agri-food companies in the world.

Finally, the most significant "silence" in the H5N1 crisis concerns agricultural and processing workers. This is a silence reinforced by the WHO *Recommendations* which state that: "No case has yet been detected among workers in the commercial poultry sector."

As a result of this claim, **no measures are proposed to national governments to protect agricultural workers or poultry processing workers.**

3. The silence on agricultural workers and H5N1

There in fact have been several reported cases of poultry workers who tested positive for H5N1 infection, including three workers from a poultry farm near Chennai, India, who tested positive for the H5N1 virus in May 2005, and at least one worker on a commercial farm in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, where 25,000 chickens were slaughtered in June 2005. (The test results on another 79 workers have not yet been reported).

More importantly, the fact that real information about possible infection is hidden for economic reasons applies even more so to workers who are vulnerable to dismissal or persecution for reporting suspected cases and where the responsibility for reporting depends solely on the companies in the commercial poultry sector. This problem is even greater in the case of undocumented agricultural workers and migrant workers whose precarious employment and fear of contact with authorities makes them particularly vulnerable.

As with many international guidelines and action plans there is no recognition of the role of waged agricultural workers on both small-scale farms and commercial breeding facilities. Most reports of the culling of flocks of birds that number in their thousands *on a single farm* never mention workers, even though the scale of operations suggest that waged workers must be employed on these farms.

We face a situation where extensive data on poultry infected with H5N1 and destroyed in culling operations co-exists with a complete absence of any data regarding the number of agricultural workers employed on affected farms or breeding facilities. This in turn means there is no way of determining whether workers were infected or suffered illness, whether they lost wages or became unemployed as a result of the loss of poultry or closure of farms.

In government compensation programmes it is also unclear whether agricultural workers are specifically recognized. In most cases, provisions are made to compensate farmers and owners of breeding facilities, but **workers are denied compensation for lost wages or loss of employment.**

4. Agricultural workers are on the front line in the H5N1 battle

According to the WHO reports on the risk of H5N1 in people: "Direct contact with infected poultry, or surfaces and objects contaminated by their droppings, is considered the main route of human infection." This kind of direct contact with poultry and surfaces and objects contaminated with droppings is a daily occurrence for agricultural workers, placing them on the front line of the battle with H5N1.

Detailed guidelines on surveillance and monitoring of poultry have also been produced by international agencies and national governments. The purpose is to identify sick birds as soon as possible and take immediate action to contain the outbreak. Again we see that the frontline role of agricultural workers is ignored.

Not only are workers exposed to possible infection because of daily contact with poultry, they are also in the best position to visually identify sick birds and report suspected cases of H5N1.

Several guidelines deal with the protection of health workers and veterinarians during culling operations. But the reality is that when large scale culling operations are conducted **agricultural workers are often directly involved in the killing and disposal of infected birds**. News reports on the recent culling of thousands of domestic fowl in Turkey and Romania, for example, describe very clearly the involvement of farm workers as well as soldiers.

The involvement of agricultural workers culling infected flocks is common in Southeast Asia. It is also common for agricultural workers to be instructed to clean up affected farms and breeding houses once the crisis is over and breeding is re-started.

Referring only to health workers, the WHO update in January 2004 states that:

While rapid culling of infected or exposed flocks is strongly recommended, prevention of infection during culling operations must also be given high priority. **Culling operations can place large numbers of workers at risk of brief but intensive exposure to the virus.**

This raises very serious questions about the hazardous conditions that agricultural workers are exposed to during culling operations.

Even if workers are not directly involved in culling and clean-up activities, they are affected by the preventative measures imposed by employers during an outbreak. In Thailand, for example, workers in several large-scale farms and commercial breeding facilities were refused the right to return home and were forced to live in poultry houses for the duration of the crisis. This is despite the fact that appropriate disinfectants and washing facilities could easily have been provided so that workers could decontaminate themselves before leaving the site.

This issue of containment raises another important issue for agricultural workers. There is a strong possibility that **seasonal agricultural workers and migrant workers may face discrimination and persecution if their mobility is blamed for the spread of the disease**. Already a number of governments have developed or are proposing H5N1 containment plans that target the mobility of agricultural workers as factor in the spread of the disease.

5. H5N1 is an OSH rights issue for agricultural workers

In one of its regular updates (issued on 22 January 2004), the WHO expressed concern that poultry workers faced “occupational exposure” to H5N1. This is one

of the few instances where H5N1 has been recognized by international agencies as an occupational hazard. But it has still not been incorporated into the existing action plans and guidelines.

In fact, one of the recommendations of the WHO 22 January 2004 update was the “targeted administration of seasonal influenza vaccine to high-risk groups, such as cullers and poultry workers”. But only a week later the WHO *Guidelines for the use of seasonal influenza vaccine in humans at risk of H5N1 infection* issued on 30 January 2004 made reference only to health workers. There is no longer any explicit recognition of the hazardous conditions faced by poultry workers. As a result, there has also been no follow up on calls for targeted immunization of poultry workers.

To date the most effective vaccine for the H5N1 virus is Tamiflu, a patented medicine produced by the Swiss-based pharmaceutical corporation, Roche. In the first nine months of this year sales of Tamiflu increased 290%, reaching US\$663 million. Roche has resisted calls to allow generic production even though the company admits it cannot meet global demand.

The company's resistance to generic production makes it virtually impossible for the necessary stocks of the vaccine to be acquired by governments and further diminishes the possibility that agricultural workers and their communities in affected countries will secure the right to access to free vaccination as a preventive measure.

The real issue at stake is that the brief recognition of H5N1 as an occupational hazard for agricultural workers has been lost. There is now an urgent need to regain this recognition, not only in terms of their recognition as a high-risk group, but in terms of the health and safety rights of workers.

In terms of workplace OSH, the H5N1 virus is a **biological hazard** for agricultural workers. (See the manual on “biological hazards” in *Health, Safety and Environment: A Series of Trade Union Education Manuals for Agricultural Workers* published by the IUF and ILO).

According to **Article 14 of the ILO Convention No.184 on Safety and Health in Agriculture**:

National laws should ensure that risks such as those of infection, allergy or poisoning are prevented or kept to a minimum when biological agents are handled, and activities involving animals, livestock and stabling areas, comply with national or other recognized health and safety standards.

Specific provisions for reducing biological risks are outlined in **Paragraph 8 of the ILO Recommendation No.192 on Safety and Health in Agriculture**.

Viewed as health and safety rights of agricultural workers, responses to suspected H5N1 in livestock must not only include the right to personal protective equipment, training in handling infected animals, etc, but **also the right to refuse to work and the right to report cases of suspected H5N1 without fear of dismissal or persecution**. It should also include the right of unions to request independent assessment by medical experts and veterinarians of those affected farms and breeding facilities prior to workers returning to work.

Ultimately, unions must advance these health and safety rights as an integral component of national surveillance and response systems. Governments and the public must be made aware that these OSH rights are valuable tools in the fight to contain H5N1 and other diseases. In conjunction with this it is essential that the **ratification of ILO Convention No.184** is seen as a necessary step in government action on H5N1 and that **the ILO become actively involved in FAO and WHO action plans and guidelines**. It is essential that the rights of agricultural workers are addressed in this global crisis.



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