Strengthening Turkmenistan's Capacity to Control Avian Influenza

Oraz Sultanov of the Ashgabat Office tells the story.

Three years ago, the threat of Avian Influenza loomed in Turkmenistan. Neighboring countries were struggling to contain outbreaks of this lethal disease. And Turkmenistan was an important stopover for thousands of migratory birds, which could carry the virus.

Thanks to Government efforts to contain and control the spread of the virus and prepare for a possible outbreak of Avian Influenza in people and animals, there have been no cases of Avian Influenza in the country to-date. The Government's program was carried out through support from the World Bank.

To prevent and control outbreaks in animals, better planning, coordination and surveillance was needed. So were faster and more reliable tests for the dangerous and infectious virus.

The Avian Influenza virus is widespread in poultry and is a risk to human health. Infected poultry can infect humans. Once in the human body, the virus can mutate so it is easily transmitted from person to person.

Following a thorough assessment of Turkmenistan's laboratory services, the country's central veterinary laboratory was renovated and equipped to allow testing of this dangerous virus in a highly secure and contained environment to avoid any risk of it spreading and infecting others. To this end, staff were trained to handle and test Avian Influenza samples safely and accurately. Regional laboratories were also renovated and provided with basic equipment so that staff there could perform preliminary tests.

"About 130 people have benefited from the training delivered under the project which strengthened their knowledge on the Avian Influenza and similar diseases among birds, their prevention, diagnostics and treatment. Also, several specialists have attended laboratory training of an international caliber," says Akmurad Yazkhanov, coordinator of the Animal Health component from the Veterinary Union.

Key ministries and government agencies practiced responding to a simulated outbreak. As a result, they put in place a number of interagency responses and coordination mechanisms to insure effective collaboration among the Ministry of Health and Medical Industry, the Veterinary Union and Ministry of Nature Protection, and others.

A vast communications campaign was carried out to inform the public about Avian Influenza and measures to mitigate it. Broadcasts on the topic aired on Turkmen TV. Posters, video and radio spots on Avian Influenza prevention and safe practices were developed by the Health Communication Center of the Ministry of Health and UNICEF. Nearly three million posters, booklets, brochures, information
calendars for each target group—health workers, veterinary workers, schoolchildren, hunters—were printed and disseminated throughout the country.

Fortunately, the country has had no registered cases of Avian Influenza to-date, and is now better prepared to respond to any potential outbreaks.