

Opening remarks by Dr Shigeru Omi,
World Health Organization
Regional Director for the Western Pacific,
to the Japan-WHO Joint Meeting on
Early Response to Potential Influenza Pandemic
Tokyo, 12-13 January 2006

Let me begin by thanking our hosts, the Japanese government, for co-sponsoring with us this vitally important meeting. Japan's involvement this week is yet another reflection of the government's commitment to the global fight against avian influenza, as outlined by the Prime Minister, Mr Junichiro Koizumi, in Kuala Lumpur last month.

None of us in this room needs reminding of the danger the world is facing. As the new cases of human infection with the H5N1 virus in Turkey show, the situation is worsening with each month and the threat of an influenza pandemic is continuing to grow.

However, while what is happening in Turkey and elsewhere is obviously worrying, we should not lose track of the fact that Asia is still the epicentre of the threat to global health posed by this virus. It is here that contact between infected poultry and humans is the greatest, and because of this it is here that a pandemic could possibly start. Therefore, it is timely that this meeting should be taking place in Asia with representatives of the affected countries.

Over the past two years or so, we have learned that we are dealing with a virus that is not only very resilient but also extremely unstable and unpredictable. Despite everybody's best efforts, it continues to spread and to claim lives. I believe we have good reason to fear that this virus still has some nasty surprises in store.

But we are not without defences. Over the past few months, a genuine global coalition has taken shape. Some of the world's wealthiest nations have joined forces with donor agencies and specialist bodies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Organization for Animal Health, and WHO to offer assistance to affected countries.

At the same time these affected countries have responded courageously to the challenges they face. As I personally saw recently on a visit to an affected area in China, officials are doing their very utmost in difficult circumstances to contain this epidemic. I know this is also the case in other affected countries in this region. In this context, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the representatives here of those affected countries for taking time out from their busy schedules to be with us for this vitally important meeting.

There have been many other meetings before this one, of course, but those meetings were broad in nature – for example, to raise awareness or to build consensus or to identify funds. But this meeting has a specific task. Building on those previous meetings, we will be focusing here on one of the most crucial public health challenges of our day. We must try to ensure that we will be ready to respond instantly with all the weapons at our disposal should the early signs of an influenza pandemic appear.

If we can achieve this rapid response, we may have a good chance of halting the spread of the virus before the situation becomes uncontrollable, or at least of slowing it down. If we fail, the consequences for societies, economies and global public health could be immeasurable.

Colleagues, a great deal is resting on our shoulders. By the time we leave here, we must all have a clear understanding of what needs to be done to enable us to contain a virus with pandemic potential. We will have to focus on many practical issues, such as how to swiftly distribute stockpiles of antiviral drugs to affected areas.

I do not believe an influenza pandemic will inevitably spring from the crisis the world is facing at the moment. Yes, the situation is very serious and getting worse. But it is still within our power to change the course of this epidemic. What we achieve here will be a vital part of that effort.

Finally, I would like to close by once again thanking my colleagues in the Japanese government for their contribution to this global struggle. Their support and assistance are greatly appreciated.

Thank you.