

Pandemic Flu Plans Need More Work, World Bank, UN Say in Report

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By Andrea Gerlin

Nov. 29 (Bloomberg) -- Governments have made "substantial" progress in preparing for a possible flu pandemic, although the lack of grants available to developing nations is hampering their ability to invest in further defenses, the World Bank and United Nations said in a new report.

Countries now must fund improvements in animal health services, as well as make sure non-health sectors - such as banking and food production and distribution - won't collapse during an outbreak, the groups said today.

"Substantial progress has been made in the initial - emergency - phase of the global response to highly pathogenic avian influenza and threats to public health," the report's authors wrote. "Whilst there is strong progress in the health sector, awareness of the importance of other sectors is significantly lacking."

About \$2.3 billion has been pledged toward preparing for a pandemic triggered by the lethal H5N1 strain of bird influenza, which has killed 206 of the 335 people known to have been infected. Still, almost all of the \$1.3 billion in available grants has been distributed, mostly to international agencies, and much of the funding now on offer comes in the form of loans. Developing countries have more pressing health concerns and may not want to go into debt over bird flu, the report said.

"Developing countries' taxpayers will be bearing a growing share of the cost of delivering a global public good," said Olga Jonas, an economic adviser at the World Bank and one of the report's authors. "This is not only inequitable - the poor paying to save the rich, if you will - but also risky."

Western Pledges

The \$2.3 billion in funds include \$433 million pledged by the U.S., \$232 million agreed by Japan, \$193 million offered by the European Commission and \$93 million granted by Australia.

The former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan, where five died from avian flu last year, got \$6.69 million, including \$5.15 million of World Bank loans. In Bangladesh, where the H5N1 virus was found in poultry this year, \$16 million of the \$18.46 million committed is in the form of loans from the World Bank.

Developing countries won't be able to sustain the borrowing, Jonas said. "Rather than borrow, many poor countries may abandon their animal disease-control programs," she said.

The virus has already caused the deaths of almost 300 million poultry in 60 countries since 2003, five more countries than in 2006.

Improvements

The report, by the Washington-based international bank and the U.N. System Influenza Coordinator, is based on data from 146 of 173 countries that responded to a survey in August. The information was self-reported by governments and is being checked by the agencies, which said it wasn't possible to verify all the data they collected.

Most countries that responded to the survey said their ability to respond to the H5N1 virus in poultry had improved and that outbreaks were detected faster with more effective responses. Reporting time improved to an average of three days from nine days in 2006, the report said.

Animal health services were still "substandard" in most countries, with outdated or non-existent legislation and rules. Staff resources, education and training of veterinarians were a "source of concern" in almost every country and laboratory capacity was weak at the national and regional level.

While human flu surveillance has improved globally, 36 of 133 countries responding said they lacked the ability to detect and confirm the highly pathogenic H5N1 influenza, according to national or World Health Organization criteria.

Inadequate Surveillance

"Existing surveillance systems in many countries on the frontline of avian influenza remain inadequate," the authors wrote.

European Union countries' plans lacked coherence regarding travel restrictions, border interventions, the use of masks and intentions to close schools, the report said. The U.S. plan was the most prescriptive, with specific recommendations according to pandemic severity.

Only a small proportion of preparedness plans focused on sectors other than health. Of 29 national plans evaluated in Asia and the Pacific, where health officials believe the pandemic threat may be greatest, only one considered finance and banking and only four mentioned food production and distribution, according to the report.

"Organizations responsible for banking, power, telecommunications, food and fuel distribution, water and maintaining the rule of law should develop business continuity plans to continue working in the face of significant absenteeism of staff," the report's authors wrote.

The World Bank and U.N. also recommended that countries expand pandemic planning from short-term responses to include sustained medium- and long-term strategies. An intensive response is especially needed where the virus continues to spread among poultry and in five countries - Indonesia, Egypt, Nigeria and

possibly part of Bangladesh and China - where the virus is considered to be entrenched.

``Considering these emerging challenges, a three- to five-year road map is needed - now - to build on and strengthen efforts to date," the report said.

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