

United Nations Development Programme

Programme of Assistance to the Palestinian People

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Special Projects and Topics

Combating the avian flu in times of conflict: UN coordination at its best

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It is one thing for a country to face the threat of an avian flu pandemic in times of peace, but facing it in times of conflict is a different story altogether. This is especially true when the authorities responsible are ill-equipped to handle a mass outbreak, as was the case in the Gaza strip last March; and even more so when the area in question, the occupied Palestinian territory, is part of a sub-region that is at particularly high risk due to its large population of wild birds. Add to these considerations the dense population and inadequate economic, medical and veterinary resources, and the Gaza strip may well be the sub-region's weakest link.

At the time of the outbreak in Gaza, 400,000 birds were culled for possible infection with the lethal form H5N1 influenza virus (i.e. over 20% of the poultry industry in Gaza), leaving the farmers and the Palestinian Authority scrambling for solutions. Even worse, fearing the complete loss of their livelihood, many farmers did not report the infections, and in many instances refused to destroy their flocks. So serious was the situation that a leading think tank suggested at the time that if the avian flu virus, which hitherto was not capable of human-to-human infection, were to mutate to a more lethal form, it would likely occur in a place like the Gaza strip. Something had to be done, and fast.

Heeding the call of duty, UNDP's Programme of Assistance to the Palestinian People (PAPP) spearheaded an effort with UN sister agencies including, WHO, UNRWA, FAO, UNICEF, UNPA, and WFP that resulted in the establishment of a substantive "Interagency Framework for Avian Influenza and Pandemic Response." In places as volatile as the occupied Palestinian territory, where there is significant UN presence, UN agencies commonly coordinate their efforts to avoid duplication. Not only did each agency fully participate in the creation of the framework, but it also invested some of its core resources and distinct expertise.

This enhanced coordination was also apparent in the collective effort to ensure the safety of UN staff in case of a future outbreak. Like many other Country Offices, UNDP took the lead in forming a Crisis Management Team to develop a contingency plan to ensure maximum preparedness, including the stockpiling of Tamiflu and antibiotic drugs, identifying national hospitals and developing a crisis communications strategy.

For Jens Toyberg-Frandzen, the new Special Representative of UNDP in Jerusalem, this unprecedented level of UN coordination in the oPt. is necessary, if not natural: "The UN can no longer afford not to coordinate and collaborate between agencies. We not only have to speak with one voice, but we should also act like a good family, each member contributing distinct strengths to serve a common purpose and shared vision. The case of the avian flu crisis in Gaza perfectly illustrates the need for stronger synergy. It's an exception that proves the rule."



It was precisely this synergy and collaboration between UN agencies that not only allowed the UN to take a lead in combating the outbreak, but has also served as a catalyst for action. Shortly after the framework was established, the World Bank pledged US\$3 million to be implemented through UNDP to finance the most critical start-up activities by the UN agencies, including the launching of the process of payment of compensation, the acquisition of testing equipment, awareness raising, the safe disposal of birds and the decontamination of infected areas. This funding is in addition to a US\$10 million dollar grant by the Bank that will be implemented through the Palestinian Authority. Norway has also injected US\$1.6 million into the interagency effort, while several donors such as Russia have pledged funds directly to the Palestinian Authority through the President's Office to complement the UN agencies' work.

The central aim of all these efforts is to contain current and future outbreaks, mitigate their impact on public health and the economy, ensure preparedness on the national level for a human pandemic, and implement a long-term strategy for the recovery of the poultry industry. All these goals are crucial for Gaza, one of the most densely populated areas in the world with over 70% of the population below the poverty. Add to this the fact that 88% of the protein intake of residents in Gaza is poultry based (chicken, eggs etc.) and that the poultry industry provides income for over 40,000 residents, and one gets an idea of the gravity of a possible avian flu outbreak

There is no doubt that such an outbreak could have a devastating impact on the economy and health. Yet through solid coordination, UN agencies have played a central role to combat the current threat and ensure that the Palestinian people are more adequately prepared.