



Convention on the  
Conservation of  
Migratory Species of  
Wild Animals



Agreement on the  
Conservation of  
African-Eurasian  
Migratory  
Waterbirds (AEWA)



Bonn, 22 February 2006

## PRESS RELEASE

### **Avian Influenza and the United Nations Environment Programme: investigating the root causes of the spreading of the disease and effective solutions for its containment.**

*"Blaming bird migrations is misleading and would not promote lasting solutions" - says the Executive Secretary of the UNEP Convention on Migratory Species. "The international community should focus instead on the ecological, social and economic causes of the spreading such as the drastic reduction of wildlife habitats and unsustainable farming practices, which have led to an unhealthy proximity of migratory birds and domesticated animals".*

As Avian Influenza reaches Africa, India and Western Europe, migrations of birds continue to be identified as the main cause of the spread, threatening panic in areas where wild birds feed, rest or breed and reinforcing the idea that solutions to prevent the pandemic are to be found in the control of this phenomenon which has been a central part of natural ecosystems for millennia.

By continuing to focus only on bird migrations, other mechanisms and paths for the contamination are being underestimated, and effective protection measures ignored. UNEP, in collaboration with its Convention on Migratory Species based in Bonn and the related African Eurasian Waterbird Agreement are convening a meeting of experts to investigate the root causes of the spread and identify effective solutions for its containment. The meeting, to be held in Nairobi at the UNEP headquarters on 10-11 April 2006, will deliver scientific advice to governments by trying to provide an answer to a number of unresolved issues.

Since the AI "story" merged, too many voices in the media have been pointing at what looks like an extremely easy, although logical, assumption: as outbreaks appear in different locations, the cause should be mobile, 'migratory' in nature, traveling from one site to another. As wild migratory birds were found infected, they immediately became the authors of the crime. However, as in any normal criminal investigation, all clues should be considered, and all evidence gathered.

First, is the spread really following only migratory routes? In the last couple of weeks, outbreaks are appearing contemporarily in different, quite distant locations. However, during their migrations birds reach different grounds at different time and stages. For instance in India migratory birds landed in September, much earlier than the spreading. "If

they at all had carried the virus, it would have been noticed much earlier” remarks Dr. Taej Mundkur, an ornithologist from Wetlands International member of CMS/AEWA coordinated scientific task force on 'Wild Birds and Avian Influenza'. Why this time gap if an infected bird should normally release the virus within a couple of weeks since the infection?

Also, there seem to be little correlation between the predominantly north-south orientation of flyways and the southeast to northwest path by which the virus has spread from SE Asia to Eastern Europe. How can this be explained? Why are some countries along migratory routes not vulnerable and others, outside of these corridors, being affected? What are other ways in which the virus can be spread? Dr. Mundkur remarked in previous interviews that movement of poultry and poultry products have been found to be most common cause of spread of virus across the world.

Moreover, there are a number of questions on the dangers posed by migratory birds to humans. Are migratory birds primary carriers, if high pathogenic avian influenza viruses are very rare in these wild animals? It should be reminded that wild birds have not been implicated in any human AI infections yet recorded. While there seem to be now sufficient evidence that some wild bird species can survive the H5N1 infection and even not develop the disease, in most cases H5N1 has been detected in dying or moribund birds. It is difficult for sick and dying animals to be vectors as they will not be able to fly long distances. Therefore, to which extent are migratory birds a natural reservoir of H5N1 or are they mainly victims of it, as they have contracted from intermingling with domestic fowl? Why is such intermingling increasingly taking place – could one reason be the reduction of wetlands where migratory birds previously used more exclusively? Who is responsible for the loss of those wetlands?

There is the need to better understand which species can be carriers, and which ones cannot contract the virus. Also, amongst those subject to infection, it is important to differentiate between those that do not survive, and have therefore a limited capability to spread the virus, and the asymptomatic carriers whose role in the transmission of the virus needs to be further explored.

UNEP is also concerned with the solutions proposed to contain the pandemic. While most of the cases are found in poultry, culling of wild birds is still being floated as a possible means to stop the spread. The Convention on Migratory Species, which has 25 years of experience in the conservation of wild animals worldwide, sees culling as the 'quick fix', definitely a wrong approach diverging efforts and attention from the real causes of the spread of bird flu and effective solutions. Unanimously, meetings of the Contracting Parties to CMS, AEWA and the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, three international agreements specialized on migratory animals and their habitats, have rejected culling as a plausible solution.

"What's happening in the world with AI is simply highlighting the connection between the degradation of ecosystems and their vulnerabilities" – says Robert Hepworth, Executive Secretary of the Convention. "The proximity of migratory birds to poultry is the outcome of incorrect planning and development paths, which have caused the sharing of important habitats for migratory birds - like wetlands - between wildlife and farms, with the obvious consequences we are now experiencing".

Ecological imbalances caused by proximity, high density of development and unsustainable agriculture and farming, which increase the pressure on ecosystems, compromise their correct functioning.

"The 'quick fix' we are witnessing now is not the solution. Vaccines, quarantine, antivirals could contain this spread, but the truth is that, unless we work to reestablish a correct balance between the human-made world and nature, or to say it in more scientific terms, we work to maintain the resilience of ecosystems to human pressure, the problem will re-emerge" continues Mr. Hepworth "It might be a different disease, involving different species, but it will happen again" he predicts " unless the international community addresses the real causes of environmental degradation".

"Blaming migratory birds seems the easiest way not to focus on the real problems related to development and unsustainable agricultural practices" echoes Mr. Bert Lenten, Executive Secretary of the African Eurasian Waterbirds Agreement. "We should focus on effective conservation measures for wildlife and their habitats, thus maintaining healthy and uncontaminated ecosystems".

The two international conservation agreements have already created, in collaboration with a number of other international organizations concerned with the spreading of the virus in wildlife, a taskforce on avian influenza and wild birds which regularly meets by teleconference since August last year. The scientific taskforce has produced advise, widely circulated in the form of press releases, to raise the awareness of the international community on the effects that the flu is having on wildlife, and to stress how this phenomenon is both a human health concern and a conservation issue.

The meeting in Nairobi will consider the latest scientific evidence, provide expert advice to this investigation and reliable information supported by science. "There is no need for further speculations, now its time to stick to the science" concludes Mr. Hepworth.

The Convention was also tasked by UNEP to create an early warning system, to analyze and study migration paths and hotspots of possible contacts between migratory birds and poultry, so to scientifically map those areas, which need to be alerted for a possible outbreak. The early warning system will consequently identify those areas where domesticated animals and wildlife have to share the same habitat, thus providing a detailed picture of regions which will need careful planning of future developments as well as better conservation and restoration measures.

Conservation and sustainable development are claimed by the United Nations Environment Programme as the policies and solutions for a healthy future. The case of avian influenza is another confirmation for the need of a balanced approach between growth and protection of the environment.

Useful links:

[www.cms.int](http://www.cms.int)

[www.unep-aewa.org](http://www.unep-aewa.org)

[www.wetlands.org](http://www.wetlands.org)

For more information please contact:

**Paola Deda**

External relations

UNEP/CMS

8, Martin Luther King Strasse

53175 Bonn

Tel +49. 228.815.2462

e-mail:pdeda@cms.int