

**Opening Remarks As Delivered
Under Secretary Ed Avalos
7th International Ministerial Conference on Avian and Pandemic Influenza
Hanoi, Vietnam
April 20, 2010**

Good morning. I am very pleased and honored to be here today on behalf of the United States and its delegation.

I would like to thank the Government of Vietnam and especially President Triet, Prime Minister Dung, and Deputy Prime Minister Nhan for hosting this year's conference and for being leaders in the fight against avian influenza. It is unfortunate that their country has been especially hard hit by this disease.

In the face of the H5N1 threat, Vietnam has been a model for the rest of the world to follow in its response and in its support for global action to confront pandemic influenza.

Particularly noteworthy was Vietnam's initiative in developing a comprehensive response when H5N1 first appeared.

Moreover, the Government has cooperated with the international community, consistently sharing animal and human samples, thereby contributing to the global response.

Colleagues in my Government's key technical agencies in the pandemic influenza fight, including US Department of Agriculture, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and others, have been honored to work with Vietnam's skilled and committed Vietnamese counterparts.

Within the last few days Vietnam confirmed its 119th human case of H5N1 avian influenza, which has killed about half of the victims and severely sickened others here.

So our hosts are acutely aware of the need for the ongoing work we are gathered here to continue. The extensive efforts Vietnam have made to ensure the success of this meeting graphically demonstrates Vietnam's continuing commitment.

Beyond this gathering, we pleased that Vietnam continues to work towards a sustainable response to H5N1, building off of its largely successful emergency response.

I think it appropriate and encouraging for Vietnam's Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Dr. Cao Duc Phat, to have planned to deliver today's welcome address to you, if not for the eruption of the volcano in Iceland, which has delayed his travel. And I am especially grateful to Vietnam's Minister of Health, Mr. Nguyen Quoc Trieu, for stepping-in to deliver this morning's welcoming address.

Since the first of these conferences in 2005, we have made great strides. Working together, we have prioritized our needs and coordinated our resources, developed strategic plans, and sustained a high-level of momentum for continued cooperation.

The importance of the linkages established over these past five years, the over four billion dollars committed by the international community to the effort, the joint planning for rapid pandemic response, and the exchange of scientific, technical and epidemiological data were tested and proven effective in the global response to the A/H1N1 influenza pandemic. I am pleased to report that the U.S. has continued its contributions to this effort, bringing the total we have dedicated to combat the influenza threat since 2005 to over \$1.5 billion U.S.

The current pandemic, involving a new influenza strain originating in the Americas, confirmed the need for a global approach toward pandemic threats. The fact that the new virus involved a zoonotic crucible other than birds also highlighted the importance of a holistic approach to the intersection of animal and human diseases.

Our sympathy and condolences go out to the thousands of families that have lost members to H1N1. We also empathize with the millions who have been infected and whose livelihoods have been impacted. And yet the H1N1 pandemic has been relatively mild. The costs of confronting it have none the less been considerable -- a wake-up call to those who thought that the attention paid to “bird flu” had been overblown and was no longer needed.

Agriculture has played a historic role in helping to control the emergence of many human diseases, like influenza, as we continue to observe and address dealing with the H1N1 pandemic and remaining vigilant toward the ongoing H5N1 avian influenza threat.

We are here to focus on the “big picture” of influenza viruses, and it is significant that, for the first time since the H5N1 avian influenza pandemic threat was acknowledged, the name of our ministerial conference reflects a focus on all influenza viruses of animals that may emerge to affect humans, and vice versa.

In discussions here, I urge you to keep in mind the linkages between human, animal, and environmental health as we look toward the future.

I am—of course—referring to the One Health concept of equilibrium between animals, people, and our environment.

One Health is not new to us. It was discussed at the preceding conferences in New Delhi and Sharm el-Sheikh and many other forums. As we move into this conference, it is imperative that we continue to embrace the One Health concept and apply its principles.

A cornerstone of this concept is enhanced coordination between the agriculture and public health sectors for disease surveillance, detection, and control. As an agricultural professional

myself, it has always been very clear to me that our agricultural organizations play a direct role in public health, especially our efforts to mitigate veterinary diseases and ensure the healthfulness of agricultural practices and products.

However, the term “coordination” can be vague to some. How much coordination is enough? What is the right level of coordination in order to make a beneficial impact on health? These are important questions that our conference should aim to shed light on.

One way that the United States Department of Agriculture has embraced One Health is through the recent implementation of a One Health Multiagency Coordination (MAC) Group, which I co-chair.

This group provides USDA with a central point of coordination on complex issues. Among other things, USDA’s One Health MAC Group encourages a sharing and synergy of ideas about how we work on health and environment issues, it finds opportunities to optimize our scarce resources, and it ensures timely decisions to advance our Department’s mission to combat diseases.

It is through the efforts of the One Health MAC Group and the One Health Joint Working Group that USDA discusses and develops joint project proposals with our government partners, such as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Equally important is that we realize that neither U.S. technical agencies nor those of any other single country can deal comprehensively with human and animal disease threats. Viruses do not respect borders. For that reason, the United Nations created the Office of the UN Systems Influenza Coordinator, so ably led by Dr. David Nabarro. We also want to thank and congratulate WHO, UNICEF and all UN agencies and private sector actors that have performed so admirably in the fight against H1N1.

For that reason, too, our State Department and the Foreign Ministries of virtually all nations are engaged intensely in global health diplomacy, a “growth industry” as populations expand, food supplies are stressed and zoonotic exposure grows. Energetic health diplomacy can promote transparency, rapid communications and efficient disease response to promote the well-being of all people, everywhere.

It is imperative that human and animal health officials from around the world continue active coordination in our respective venues. When such venues do not yet exist, we must pursue opportunities to create them. Appropriate sharing of critical information is perhaps the most important aspect of One Health coordination. Ultimately sharing information between the public health and veterinary communities enables either side to rapidly identify pathogens of interest, particularly those that have pandemic potential.

If we address influenza and other emerging threats while they are still solely present in animals, we stand a better chance of anticipating and mitigating pandemics in humans.

This year, I am confident that we can continue to advance that work in an even more collaborative, holistic One Health approach.

Over the next two days we will be learning a great deal from one another. But that learning should not stop when the conference ends. We must stay engaged in an ongoing dialogue at all levels. We must strengthen the relationships we have, develop new partnerships where necessary, and always remember that global issues require individual actions to achieve global solutions. To solve current and future pandemic challenges, our individual and collective actions must take us to the intersection of animal, human, and environmental health.

I wish you all the best for an informative and productive conference.