

PRESS RELEASE

Strengthening integrated disease surveillance in West Africa



29 September 2009/Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso – Experts from 13 West African countries and representatives of partners, began a three-day meeting here Tuesday ahead of a ministerial meeting on how to strengthen integrated disease surveillance and response across border areas in the sub-region.

The experts are preparing the meeting of Ministers on Friday, which is expected to come out with guidelines in response to incessant disease outbreaks in the sub-region such as the deadly epidemics of cholera, meningitis, measles, viral hemorrhagic fevers between 1995 and 1996 as well as a recrudescence of polio and the spreading A H1N1 flu pandemic.

“Disease and epidemics do not respect boundaries. We must therefore set up efficient surveillance mechanism in each country,” said Prof Adama Traore, Secretary General of the Ministry of Health of Burkina Faso, who declared open the meeting of experts on behalf of the Minister.

Recalling that this was the third meeting in Ouagadougou following those of 1996 and 1998, he urged participants to come up with an action plan for integrated disease surveillance and epidemic control in the sub-region. Prof Traore thanked partners including the World Health Organization African Programme for Onchocerciasis Control (WHO/APOC), which is co-sponsoring the meeting, and called for more support.

In her opening remarks, the WHO Country Representative, Dr Djamila Cabral, said countries in the sub-region should identify relevant interventions for effective disease control and surveillance across border areas.

The Joint Action Forum (JAF), the governing body of WHO/APOC at its fourteenth session in Kampala in December 2008, urged onchocerciasis endemic countries to strengthen cross-border cooperation for effective surveillance and elimination of the disease and other neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) in Africa. This is to safeguard the gains of the Onchocerciasis Control Programme in West Africa (OCP) and APOC.

Following epidemic outbreaks, health ministers and those in charge of ministries of interior in West Africa, Algeria and Chad signed in October 1996 in Ouagadougou, a Memorandum of Cooperation to strengthen epidemiological surveillance and outbreak management in the border areas of countries.

Also, at a meeting held in Bissau in November, 2007, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) health ministers signed a declaration on accelerating the fight against epidemics of meningococcal meningitis within the African meningitis belt.

To support these initiatives, the WHO has developed an integrated disease surveillance strategy, including laboratory capacity building and created the International Coordinating Group (ICG) for the supply of specific drugs, vaccines and consumables to countries facing epidemics, and established inter-country teams to increase the response capacity of the WHO Regional Office for Africa closer to the countries.

Enhanced surveillance of onchocerciasis and meningitis, also developed by WHO in collaboration with its partners, were implemented from 2002 and 2003 respectively by the WHO Multi-Disease Surveillance Centre (MDSC) under APOC activities, and the Meningitis Vaccine Project (MVP).

The ongoing meeting in Ouagadougou is an opportunity for high-level dialogue and decision-making to harmonise control strategies for more effective and efficient use of limited resources. It will also set out the necessary measures for enhancing disease surveillance, including better coordination and harmonization measures, taking into account national priorities.

The meeting will also develop guidelines to strengthen cross-border activities and adopt a joint action plan for implementation.

The meeting, which is being attended by experts from Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo, will also lay the basis for cooperation with technical and financial partners. Also represented are bilateral organisations -- USAID, JICA, the African Development Bank, the World Bank and the Canadian International Development Agency.