Epizootic of Avian Flu  
in the Southern Federal okrug of the Russian Federation

Nine subjects of the Southern Federal okrug of the Russian Federation have been hit by epizootic of Avian Flu, caused by A (H5N1) virus, in February-March 2006. According to the data of the Federal Surveillance Service of Consumer’s Rights and Human Well-Being (www.gsen.ru), 30 districts, 7 cities, 78 residential areas and six bird farms have been affected in Stavropol Krai, Dagestan Republic, Krasnodarsky krai, Republic of Kalmykia, Republic of Adygea, Kabardino-Balkaria, Chechen Republic, North Ossetia and Astrakhan oblast. By the end of March, the epizootic and preventive measures (culling) has killed over 1.3 million birds.

In order to minimize and eliminate the consequences of the Avian Flu epizootic, and following the recommendations, issued by the Federal Surveillance Service of Consumer’s Rights and Human Well-Being, the Ministries of Health of respective republics, in cooperation with territorial agencies of surveillance control (SES) and other responsible actors, have introduced and implemented on their territories a detailed action plan, including, inter alia, creation of a special Emergency Commission comprised of relevant state structures in each republic; organisation of mobile disinfecting teams; registration, monitoring and surveillance of all poultry and cattle; vaccine procurement and poultry vaccination; coordination with the veterinary service to identify risk groups of people in contact with confirmed Avian Flu; provision of additional personnel to make door-to-door inquiries (especially in the areas of suspected Avian Flu cases); control over health status of workers in poultry production; control over borders; sanitation-quarantine checks; control over water supply and food markets; securing an appropriate stock of drugs and medical consumables; allocation of additional hospital beds; organization of practical training/field exercises among state health facilities, and awareness activities.

All over this period WHO has been closely monitoring the Avian Flu situation, providing constant updates on recent developments and activities, undertaken by the authorities. WHO examined the national response plan to Avian Flu and established contacts with relevant and responsible state authorities, including the Ministries of Health and Agriculture, the Federal Surveillance Agency, Emercom in the Republics of Chechnya, Ingushetia, North Ossetia and Kabardino-Balkaria, as well as held negotiations with the chief specialists on infections, epidemiology and surveillance of the Southern Federal okrug about WHO potential assistance in strengthening epidemiological service in the North Caucasus through the use of national experts, planning of training courses, implementation of public awareness campaigns and distribution of information materials.

On March 20-24 WHO funded participation of four experts from Chechnya, Ingushetia, North Ossetia and Kabardino-Balkaria in the All-Russian certified training course on epidemiology, organised by the Federal Institute of Epidemiology in Moscow, as part of its preparedness plan on Avian Flu and strengthening national surveillance capacity.
Children hit by unknown disease in Schelkovskoy district of Chechnya

At the end of 2005, 89 cases of an unknown disease with symptoms of asphyxia, fainting fits and hysteria were registered in Schelkovskoy district of Chechnya. The disease hit mainly children and teenagers, coming from Starogladovskaya, Shelkozavodskaya and Shelkovskaya settlements. Chief psychiatrists from the Serbsky state research centre of social and forensic psychiatry in Moscow diagnosed it as a conversion-spasmodic syndrome spread by means of psychological contagion. According to the specialists of the centre, hysteria-caused spasms and hysterical reactions are the most ancient mechanism of reaction to stress. The government of the Chechen republic has allocated 5 million roubles from its reserve fund for medical treatment of affected children. However, three months later, after treatment, received in Stavropol clinics and sanatoriums and rehabilitation centre in Argun, a large number of children was still reported to continue experiencing serious health problems, linked mainly to convulsions, aggression and hallucinations. Children do not attend schools. Chechen officials are deeply concerned over the children’s health status and call for their thorough medical examination and subsequent follow up and psycho-social rehabilitation.

In April, WHO will undertake a special monitoring mission to Schelkovskoy district of Chechnya in order to receive first-hand information. WHO will visit the central district hospital in Shelkovskoi, district hospital in Chervlennoe and FAPs in Staroshedrinskaya and Kobi, as well as pay visits to the families of affected children.

INGUSHETIA AND CHECHNYA

Demography

As of 31 March 2006, a total of 25,080 internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Chechnya (5,710 families) were registered for assistance in Ingushetia in the database of UNHCR’s implementing partner, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). Of this total, 9,051 persons (2,001 families) were in temporary settlements, and 16,029 persons (3,709 families) in private accommodation.

TB

On 24 March, the Republican conference commemorating 2006 World TB Day took place in Nazran, Ingushetia. 150 representatives from the government bodies, health professionals, educational institutions, clergy, NGO and UN community attended the event, coupled with the children’s drawing contest and performance and distribution of awareness booklets.

WHO continues delivering (with WFP support) food commodities to the Republican TB hospital in Nazran, Ingushetia. In January - March, around 330 TB patients (with over 40 children) received some 8600 kg of flour, over 900 kg of oil, 120 kg of sugar and 30 kg of salt every month.

Epidemiology and immunization

Despite high standards and timely vaccination of children against poliomyelitis in the Russian Federation, re-vaccinating of children at the age of twelve and twenty-four months falls short of the required norm in a number of regions, including Chechnya. With this in view and in accordance with the special resolution, signed by the Chief Sanitary Doctor of the Russian Federation, Chechnya will conduct an additional vaccination campaign in spring 2006. The campaign will involve no less than 95% of children under five years old and will be held on 24-29 April and 22-27 May. Control over implementation of the additional vaccination campaign is entrusted to
the heads of regional health service bodies and head sanitary doctors of the respective territories.

Within its EPI programme, aiming at increasing the coverage and quality of the immunization services for children in Chechnya and Ingushetia, UNICEF has recently procured: over 150,000 disposable syringes for distribution to paediatric and mother and child health facilities, medical equipment (electronic scales and auxanometers) for 43 primary health care facilities in Chechnya and 20 in Ingushetia, IT equipment (computers and printers) to the epidemiological departments of the local Ministries of Health, as well as to the vaccination centres in five districts in Ingushetia and 16 rural districts (plus Grozny city) in Chechnya.

Within the framework of the same project, and in cooperation with the MoH of Ingushetia, UNICEF conducted a one-day conference for paediatricians and epidemiologists to discuss future immunization strategies and other relevant issues, as well as the poor environmental situation, pollution and stressful living conditions. Some 19 participants, including two specialists from the Statistical Department of the Chechen Ministry of Health, the ICRC and various NGO representatives attended the conference.

**Health situation**

According to the numerous reports, received from the responsible authorities in Chechnya, the environmental situation in the republic remains alarming. The republican environmental control service does not function. The department of natural resources, located in Gudermes, does not perform the required duties. There is no control over industrial production and mining. The overwhelming majority of activities involving environmental pollution is performed without the necessary licenses, ecology passports, or permission documents. Despite regular checks for compliance with environmental standards, no actions against violation or preventive measures to ensure compliance with environmental standards are taken. The main concern refers to mini-refineries, polluting the surface and underground waters. Many of the functioning refineries do not comply with the state required technological process of oil processing. A large number of existing boreholes are not properly sealed, with oil spreading around them and polluting hundreds of hectares of land. Only 30-35% of water springs are fit for purification, with practically all surface water sources dangerously polluted, either by human or industrial waste. In a number of industrial enterprises in Grozny radioactive material is stored right on their territories, with local authorities lacking resources for its removal and transportation to a specialised facility. Consequently, poor health of population, and particularly, the growing need for oncological services in the republic, can be attributed to the poor environmental situation and pollution, as well as to stressful living conditions. As reported by the MoH of Chechnya, the number of oncological patients in the republic is increasing – while there were 1,614 oncological patients registered in the republic in 2004, in 2005 this figure grew up 2,437. More children and younger people are diagnosed with cancer annually. Many of the registered oncology forms have not been recorded before. A considerable proportion (up to 50%) of detected patients have grave oncological conditions. The highest oncology rates (lung and skin cancer) are in the areas of traditional oil refinery industry (Kurchaloi, Shali, Grozny, Grozny-Selsky) and military activities (Achkhoi-Martan, Shali and Vedeno). Reproductive system organs cancer is more common in Gudermes, Shali, Achkhoi-Martan, Urus-Martan and Grozny. The most common registered cancer forms include gastrointestinal, lung, skin, mammary, and uterus cervix. Blood oncology is increasing, particularly, in Grozny, Grozny-Selsky, Urus-Martan and Achkhoi-Martan districts.

At the same time, the oncological service of the republic experiences grave problems. There is only one oncological dispensary and ten beds available in city hospital N1 in Grozny. Staffing is limited to eight qualified doctors, other health workers not having required training and background. Lab and diagnostic capacities merely function. Strong shortage of drugs is a constant problem. Haematological services can be obtained only at Hospital no. 10 in Grozny, which, having the necessary equipment for plas-
mapheresis, experiences persistent lack of drugs and medical consumables. Most patients undergo chemotherapy at home, for lack of space or conditions for in-patient services. No systematic detection and/or prophylactic activities take place in the republic. Only minimal oncology treatment can be received. Consequently, the bulk of patients is referred for out-of-town treatment.

The situation with communicable diseases in Chechnya is reported as critical with limited lab and treatment possibilities. In 2005, increased morbidity was registered in 32 out of total listed 38 communicable diseases (e.g. scarlet fever rates have been 23 times higher than in 2004). Among the leading infections are flu, respiratory diseases and intestinal infections. 77% of all registered intestinal infections are diagnosed as of “unknown etiologic nature”.

Health assistance

ICRC Plan of Action for 2006 envisages continued assistance to the vulnerable population in the North Caucasus. Reinforcing health services in one of the priorities, with the ICRC assisting in 2006 up to 13 hospitals in Chechnya, one in Dagestan and one in Ingushetia, as well as the Grozny central blood bank. The ICRC will also support the repair of public infrastructure such as the water supply and sewerage systems in Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan and continue mine risk education through building safe play areas for children in Chechnya. The ICRC also plans to help in restoration of a children’s department of the tuberculosis health centre in Nalchik, and an asylum for disabled children in Prokhladny, Kabardino-Balkaria.

In line with this, in addition to the regular supply of medicines and laboratory consumables to the hospitals in Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan and provision of several hospitals in Chechnya with Insulin and medical donations to the Republican Blood Bank in Grozny, in February, ICRC has rendered ad hoc assistance to Vladikavkaz Emergency Aid hospital.

IRC continues distributing multivitamins and dental hygiene education pamphlets to school-aged children in Ingushetia and in Grozny. The organization has also assisted in delivery of sanitary napkins donated by UNHCR to two local hospitals in Ingushetia and distributed 10 First Aid Kits in IRC-run schools and the IRC-run Sport Centre in Ingushetia.

Handicap International carried out a training course on polio (17-19 January) for 20 staff of its 14 assisted health rehabilitation facilities in Argun, Chechnya and a training course on stroke (16-18 March) for its 20 staff in Kislovodsk.

In January-March IMC continued CPR/first aid training sessions for its personnel, residents of local communities of IMC MMU operations and state health workers.

HIV/AIDS

Ingushetian AIDS centre reports a total of 492 HIV cases in 2005, including 48 new ones. In Chechnya there are 560 HIV cases reported for 2005, 108 of them newly registered.

WHO has sponsored participation of two doctors-laboratory technicians from the Republican Aids Centre in Grozny in the training course on “Introduction to improved quality in laboratory diagnosis and treatment of HIV/AIDS in Saratov, organized by the NGO American International Health Alliance (6-10 February), delivered two sets of HIV laboratory equipment to Gudermes central district hospital and central district hospital in Naur (Chechnya), and 8.000 HIV awareness booklets to the Republican AIDS centre in Grozny (February), as well as held a one-day training course on HIV/AIDS transmission and prevention for UN and NGO staff in Nazran (31 March).

Caritas Internationalis provided some 51 test systems to the Chechen AIDS centre and is expecting to send another 48 in the near future.
**Mother and child health**

Two maternity hospitals were opened in Chechnya - Maternity hospital no 2 in Grozny and a maternity hospital in Kurchaloi district.

Within the framework of programs on "Making Pregnancy Safer" (MPS), "Promotion of Effective Perinatal Care" (PEPC) and "Integrated Management of Childhood Illnesses" (IMCI), funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), WHO has organised in January-March the following events:

30 January – 3 February: a practical course on "Newborn Care and Breastfeeding" in Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia. 20 Obstetricians, neonatologists, paediatricians and children nurses participated;

26 February - 7 March: a training course for 40 state health workers (obstetricians and gynaecologists) on Essential Obstetric Care and Family Planning in North Ossetia;

1-3 March: a training course on infections (including Prevention of Mother-to-child transmission of HIV) in modern obstetric and gynaecological care, for 21 Chechen health workers in Nazran;

9-15 March: a training course on IMCI for 10 pre-selected IMCI facilitators from North Ossetia-Alania;

13-17 March: two series of training courses on HIV PMTCT for altogether 40 Chechen and Ingush state health workers, including paediatricians, neonatologists and gynaecologists.

WHO facilitators assisted ACF in holding a training course on breastfeeding in Nazran (6-8 February) for 20 specialists, including 11 state health workers from Shatoi/Sharoi/Itum-Kale districts, 8 ACF staff and 2 people from Chechen NGO "Sintem".

UNICEF Mother Empowerment Project (MEP), aimed at raising mothers’ awareness on various topics related to breastfeeding, immunization and early recognition of common childhood illnesses plans to target some 10,000 resident and IDP pregnant women, mothers and other primary child care providers living in Chechnya and Ingushetia, in 2006. In Ingushetia, the project is carried out by the Republican Centre for Disease Prevention, in Chechnya - by the Republican Children’s Policlinic in Grozny. UNICEF also continues to distribute its brochures on breastfeeding to pregnant women and mothers attending the sessions.

IRC continues to work in Chechnya towards improving the health outcomes of war-affected mothers and children in Grozny by providing pregnant women with psychosocial counselling, health education and safe motherhood kits.

**Mental health**

On 27 March, UNICEF opened a Family Centre 'BINONTÆ' ('family') in Beslan. The centre is opened in partnership with the Ministry of Education of North Ossetia and aims to facilitate strengthening the families’ capacity to ensure a protective environment for the psychologically
affected children, as well as to reduce the effects of long-term psychological trauma originating from the crisis in Beslan. This project is based on the results of the ‘Stress and Family’ situation assessment conducted by UNICEF in February through ‘Harmony’, the Russian Institute of Psychotherapy and Counselling (St. Petersburg).

UNICEF continues the implementation of the ‘Thank You All Who Helped Beslan’ project, in the framework of its emotional rehabilitation programme, carried out through the Centre of Ecological Education ‘Obninsk’. In addition to preparing some 120 hand-made ‘Thank You’ postcards and sending them to different people and organizations that provided support in the aftermath of the Beslan tragedy, the participants of the project have collected and prepared materials for a mobile exhibition of the children’s art works and a ‘Thank You All Who Helped Beslan’ book, which will be presented during the commemoration of the second anniversary of the school n. 1 events. In February, some 200 children from Beslan took part in the work of the UNICEF-supported centre. Activities included art interventions, game and theatre techniques, painting and modelling nature scenes. Two groups of children, parents and teachers took part in winter and spring camps with similar programmes.

UNICEF, in partnership with the Russian charitable foundation ‘NAN’, launched stage 2 of its ‘Psychosocial Baseline Study in Chechnya’, so as to further deepen the analysis of the data on psychological state of Chechen children and the availability and quality of the available governmental and non-governmental psychosocial programmes, collected during the first stage (completed in November 2005). The activities planned under stage 2 will enable UNICEF to thoroughly analyze the children’s environment, not only within their family, but also at school and at the community-level, so as to identify ways to strengthen it and make it more protective. NAN also organized and facilitated three seminars for a group of psychologists, involved in the UNICEF-supported training process for specialists in Chechnya. The psychologists were provided with skills in conducting interviews among different target groups and took an active part in the development and distribution of 4,000 questionnaires in all districts of Chechnya.

UNICEF has conducted, through the Israel Trauma Coalition (ITC)/Herzog Hospital, the second ‘Trauma Counselling’ training out of the five planned for 21 specialists from Chechnya. Peculiarities of post-trauma stress disorder, acute stress reactions, grief processing in children and parents, self-regulation and cognitive intervention techniques were among the topics included in the agenda of the training.

UNICEF has also carried out, in partnership with ‘Harmony’, the Institute of Psychotherapy and Counselling from St. Petersburg, the second training of trainers for 23 school-based psychologists from Chechnya.

IRC continued working with children in closed and open psychosocial groups in Ingushetia and Chechnya. Over 100 children per month were covered in each group in every republic. Psychosocial counsellors were also working with 5-6 year old children in five schools in Grozny. Provision of individual counselling to children, parents and teachers in Ingushetia and in Grozny also continued, as well as holding parents’ meetings with children’s psychosocial health as a topic. 1160 copies of the monthly psychosocial newsletter “SINTEM” were distributed in Ingushetia. In addition to that, IRC arranged for 19 children from Chechnya and Ingushetia to go to a one-week retreat addressing psychosocial issues through games and other relevant activities and facilitated training on the “psychology of education” for 15 psychosocial counsellors.

Other news

Two issues of the “Bulletin for health care managers in Russia”, were published by WHO Zdravinform health data base project and WHO Documentation centre in Moscow in January-February 2006, the first one had Blood safety as the topic, the second – alcohol-related healthcare problems. The bulletin can be obtained at http://zdravinform.ru
List of abbreviations:

ACF: Action Contre la Faime
CPR: Cardio-pulmonary resuscitation
DRC: Danish Refugee Council
EPI: Expanded Programme on Immunization
FAP: Feldsher/obstetric post
GP: General practitioner
HI: Handicap International
ICRC: International Committee of the Red Cross
IDPs: Internally displaced persons
IMC: International Medical Corps
IMSMA: International Management System for Mine Action
IR: Islamic Relief
IRC: International Rescue Committee
LSG: Lets Save the Generation
MDM: Médecins du Monde
MMU: mobile medical units
MoH I: Ministry of Health of the Republic of Ingushetia
MoH RF: Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation
MoH Ch: Ministry of Health of Chechnya
MRE: Mine Risk Education
MSF–B: Médecins sans Frontières-Belgium
MSF–F: Médecins sans Frontières-France
MSF–H: Médecins sans Frontières-Holland
PHO: Polish Humanitarian Organization
PTSD: Post-traumatic stress disorder
OCHA: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
SARC: Saudi Red Crescent Society
SES: Sanitary Epidemiological Surveillance
STI: Sexually Transmitted Infections
TAC: Temporary accommodation centre
UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund
UXO: Unexploded ordnance
VOM: Voice of the Mountains
WHO: World Health Organization

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