Indonesia agrees to hand bird flu information to new online database

By ROBIN McDOWELL,Associated Press Writer
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JAKARTA, Indonesia - Indonesia says it will start sharing all information about its bird flu cases with a new public database, a move experts say will help monitor the disease following the country's yearlong standoff with the World Health Organization.

China, Russia and other nations that also have withheld influenza virus samples and genetic data from the international community are taking part in the new initiative as well, saying it offers transparency and, for the first time, basic protection of intellectual property rights.

"It think it's wonderful," said Peter Palese, who studies influenza at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York, adding it will make it easier for researchers to see if the virus is mutating to a form that spreads more easily between people, with the potential to kill millions worldwide. "It goes in the direction of creating a global health conscience."

The free, online site launched Thursday, 18 months after strategic adviser Peter Bogner and 77 influential scientists and health experts wrote a letter to Nature magazine calling for information about bird flu to be shared more quickly and openly _ the birth of the Global Initiative on Sharing Avian Influenza Data, or GISAID.

Until then, research organizations often kept their own repositories of DNA sequencing data. In the case of bird flu, WHO was keeping some crucial information in a private database in Los Alamos, New Mexico, making it accessible to just 15 laboratories.

That revelation _ made public by Italian veterinarian and researcher Ilaria Capua in early 2006 _ angered many foreign governments and scientists who said it was dangerous to restrict vital data to a select few. Several boycotted the WHO's long-standing virus sharing system, instead depositing important bird flu information into existing but often inadequate public databanks.

"The reluctance by Indonesia, in particular, to share samples and genetic data was of particular concern," Harold Varmus, a Nobel prize winner and one of the signatories to the letter in Nature, said of the country that has been hardest hit by avian influenza.

Many scientists see the sprawling archipelago _ which has tallied nearly half the 240 human deaths recorded worldwide _ as a potential hotspot for a pandemic.

Last November, the WHO acknowledged at an intergovernmental meeting that it needed to urgently address the international community's growing misgivings. But it still insists some genetic data needs to be kept behind closed doors and will ask member countries at next week's World Health Assembly for up to US$10 million for a new, Los Alamos-style database.

Many countries are asking if that is necessary, especially with the creation of Thursday's new online site, which has been tailor-made by and for influenza scientists. They include members of WHO's four collaborating centers, who say full transparency will not hinder efforts to carry out their semiannual vaccine strain selection process.

"GISAID has a big head start already," said Nirmal Kumar Ganguly, the former Director General of the Indian Council of Medical Research, adding that its neutral environment has alleviated concerns many developing countries have about sharing genetic data. "I think WHO should consider supporting this platform."

One of the main selling points, he said, was the inclusion of an agreement that requires users to get permission from the data provider before applying for patents needed for vaccines, for example. Scientists also must agree to acknowledge and make an effort to collaborate with the national laboratories that contribute their influenza information.

In an effort to boost transparency GISAID's platform also offers an electronic tracking system that enables anyone who goes onto the site to see who has sent or received virus samples _ from government laboratories, to pharmaceutical companies, to universities _ something the WHO is hoping to do as well.

But even its own scientists say an interim system rushed out by the global body in January was substandard.

"There are terrible problems with the WHO tracking system," one researcher from a WHO collaborating center wrote in an e-mail seen by The Associated Press days after its launch. "We are struggling to correct even the most obvious errors."

Ultimately, the success of the GISAID database will depend on how widely it is embraced by the global community, but getting Indonesia on board was considered crucial.

The country's controversial health minister, Siti Fadilah Supari, started withholding virus samples and data from WHO in January 2007, saying she thought its virus sharing system was unfair to poor nations. She was worried pharmaceutical companies would make vaccines that would ultimately be unaffordable to her own people.

"We have always promoted the sharing of influenza data, all we ask for is that it be done in a fair, transparent and equitable manner," said Supari, vowing to start handing over DNA bird flu data for the latest human cases immediately.

Little sequencing was done during her standoff with the WHO, however, and she refused to say outright if past cases would be uploaded.

Much of the credit in bringing Supari and others on board goes to Bogner, the director of GISAID. The broadcast executive-turned-international crisis manager first became involved in the virus sharing debate during the World Economic Forum in Switzerland two years ago.

A conversation with U.S. Homeland Secretary Michael Chertoff about America's level of preparedness in the event of a human pandemic and subsequent talks with Capua and other health experts about the challenges of balancing public health and politics put him on a scientific crusade.

Bogner, of Santa Monica, California, traveled relentlessly across the globe to meet government leaders and policy makers, facilitating dialogue and in some cases convincing them to share influenza virus samples and data. In order to maintain neutrality, he also insisted in providing the lions' share of the financing.

"I think he is an exceptional man, in my view a catalyst and a free spirit with an extraordinary humanitarian objective," said David Nabarro, the U.N. official coordinating the global fight against avian influenza, adding that he thinks Bogner's efforts could go a long way toward improving trust and confidence.

Governments are not the only ones throwing their support behind the system.

The World Organization for Animal Health, which monitors the genetic evolution of the virus in animals, has asked its reference laboratories to input all the genetic information they have into the database.

"We're also trying to influence all our members to use it," said Bernard Vallat, the director general of the group. "It will help provide scientific information to the world community in an independent way."

The WHO, meanwhile, is still sitting on the fence.

David Heymann, its top flu expert, says all decisions about databases and tracking systems will be discussed at Monday's World Health Assembly.

Member countries will be asked to help bankroll a new database and the still-in-development tracking system. Some DNA sequences would continue to be sequestered at the request of individual countries, Heymann said, but others would be released into the public domain, again stripping countries of any ownership rights.

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On the Net:

GISAID: http://platform.gisaid.org/