

31 May 2010 – Geneva/Brazzaville/Cairo – Senior officials from African ministries of health and representatives of health partners and international agencies are scheduled to meet from 3-4 June in Marrakesh, Morocco, under the umbrella of the newly-created African Flu Alliance.

The Marrakesh meeting is being organized by WHO and a number of national, international and nongovernmental organizations as well as financial partners and agencies. It will be attended by representatives of African Ministries of Health and African research institutes; the Association pour la Médecine Préventive (AMP); the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the US National Institutes of Health (NIS); the German Technical Cooperation, GTZ; Fondation Mérieux, the Institut Pasteur International Network, the Fogarty International Center, (US) and the Programme for Appropriate Technology (PATH).

"We know that influenza has a significant impact on morbidity and mortality throughout Africa, but unfortunately, we don't have a great deal of data that shows this," said Dr Keiji Fukuda, Special Adviser to the WHO Director-General on Pandemic Influenza.

"Influenza is often seen as a problem for temperate countries. But, it is also a major threat to health in developing countries, including countries in tropical zones". Influenza viruses are important respiratory pathogens, and acute respiratory tract infections, such as pneumonia, are a major cause of death in Africa, particularly among children.

"The absence of adequate information, lack of awareness of the disease and other competing public health needs has meant that no specific interventions have been developed to reduce the impact of influenza in Africa," said Dr Sylvie Briand, Head of the Global Influenza Programme at WHO. A number of African countries have provided regular updates to WHO on the spread of pandemic influenza A (H1N1) 2009.

However, the impact of the pandemic on the African continent is not apparent, which indicates a need to strengthen surveillance systems to assess the effect of the pandemic across the continent.

One of the key objectives of the Marrakesh meeting is to raise awareness of the pressing need to strengthen surveillance capacity in Africa, and to prepare a roadmap of interventions and strategies to reduce the burden of influenza in the region in coming years.

More research and data will make it possible for policy-makers to develop the evidence needed to strengthen public health guidance and actions essential for limiting the impact of pandemic, zoonotic (Avian flu) and seasonal influenza on individuals and populations in the region.

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The African Flu Alliance is a new initiative that seeks to promote collaboration and exchange of information among various stakeholders in Africa and beyond.

The Global Influenza Programme is WHO's specialist programme on seasonal, avian and pandemic influenza.

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