Pandemic influenza preparedness and response planning in the European Community

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report drawn up by Adamos ADAMOU (GUE/NGL, CY) in response to the Commission communication on pandemic influenza preparedness and response planning in the EU. The report referred to the recent increase in the number of cases of avian influenza and human casualties from it in various countries, and stressed that it was a global problem which must be addressed in close cooperation with the WHO.

MEPs said that the Commission must play "a strong coordinating role" in pandemic influenza preparedness and that, in the event of a pandemic in the EU or in neighbouring states, it should be able to adopt crisis measures within 24 hours, such as quarantine and disinfection at airports as well as travel restrictions. They called for the creation of a European Influenza Task Force, coordinated by the Commission and on which Parliament would be represented, bringing together experts from relevant fields such as human and animal health, virology, epidemiology, pathology, agriculture and communications.

The committee called for improved cooperation and information-sharing between the Commission, the Member States and the European Centre for Disease Prevention (ECDC). Communication strategies at both national and EU level should be improved and Member States should ensure that information reaches the whole population, including the old, the young, the illiterate or those who do not have access to modern means of communication. Sufficient funds should be made available by both the Commission and the Member States for information campaigns.

The report emphasised that "significant measures" must be taken to prepare for a possible human pandemic, including a full assessment of hospital bed capacity at Member State level and regular pandemic simulation exercises (including in outlying regions and rural areas). It also acknowledged the need for specific scenarios for the protection of children, as well as the need to strengthen surveillance and alerting systems.

MEPs called for European R&D programmes on emergent diseases to be launched immediately to develop new antivirals, antibiotics and vaccines reliably and more quickly, and for sufficient funding to be provided under the 7th Research Framework Programme for projects on pandemic influenza and other epidemics. The Member States were urged to provide for potential cover for 25 to 30% of the population with available antivirals, while the Commission was asked to ensure that sufficient antivirals and vaccines are available for those exposed to the virus in the event of an outbreak in the EU.

In other recommendations, the report called for sufficient financial support to be provided to Asian and African countries struggling with avian influenza to improve their surveillance and disease control capacities, and urged the Commission to work for a more coherent international framework to help build up a better infrastructure for animal health in developing countries and advance research into animal health products.