

Asian Business Community Warned Against Complacency Towards Avian Flu Threat

Hong Kong Conference Told an "Unpredictable" Bird Flu Pandemic is Inevitable

International health experts and senior business leaders meeting in Hong Kong agree that an avian influenza pandemic is inevitable. They add that the unpredictability of "when" makes it essential to have contingency planning.

Speaking at a conference on 3 May, the health experts warned against complacency among business owners and managers in Asia, where avian flu is endemic and spreading. Globally, it has spread from 15 countries over the past two and half years, to 32 countries in the past two months.

The conference entitled "Business Continuity Planning and Disaster Preparedness for avian Influenza" was jointly organized by the APEC Business Advisory Council Philippines and the Hong Kong Trade Development Council.

Among the participants were senior business leaders and contingency planning executives from major companies including Jardine Matheson, American International Group, Fedex, Orient Overseas, Li & Fung and Deutsche Bank.

Speakers outlined the importance of business continuity planning and addressed how small and medium sized businesses could adequately prepare for an avian flu pandemic without incurring high costs.

Dr. Li Shichuo, Vice-Chair of the APEC Health Taskforce and Senior Advisor to the Department of International Cooperation in China's Ministry of Health, stressed the need for companies to be prepared.

"No one wants to raise alarm bells or cause unnecessary panic. We don't know for sure whether there will be a pandemic and, if it does happen, how virulent the strain will be. But it just makes sense to be prepared, just as we take out insurance in case of a fire but hope this never happens," Dr. Li said.

Dr. Ah Sian Tee, Director, Combating Communicable Diseases for the Western Pacific Regional Office of the World Health Organization, told conference delegates that the prerequisites for a pandemic already exist and the potential impact on business is significant. Dr. Tee said that if you consider the number of people who might be infected, the potentially high mortality rate, as well as the people who will be away from work to care for the ill, an outbreak of avian influenza could have a massive impact on business.

The Chairman of the Hong Kong Airport Authority and the Li & Fung Group, Dr. Victor K. Fung, said that the business community needed to acknowledge that avian flu is a major issue for all companies.

"I think we need to address bird flu as another important business issue which will have serious consequences if we don't take appropriate measures. If you set up the mechanisms to handle this type of crisis, that same mechanism can help handle other crisis situations."

Mr. Edward Laxton, Regional Vice President of Operations and Systems at American International Group, said that business continuity planning for an avian flu outbreak did not necessarily need to be expensive. Mr. Laxton suggested that the preparation could involve things as simple as bringing people in an organization together, spending time asking questions and going through the continuity planning framework.

"We found business continuity tabletop exercises to be a very valuable way to train staff and identify where we had gaps in our plan," Mr. Laxton said

John Allison, Vice-President, Human Resources in the Asia Pacific Division of FedEx, said small businesses, with limited resources, looking at continuity planning should focus on the critical parts of their business operations. "We operate in a mode where contingency plans are part of our life. We think the critical people inside our business are the account executives, couriers and call center agents. Other positions will be quickly moved around to support those functions," Mr. Allison said.

The conference was attended by over 300 representatives of multinational corporations and small-to-medium sized enterprises. The conference was the second in a series of regional seminars on avian influenza initiated by Roberto Romulo, the Chair of the APEC Business Advisory Council Philippines and the founding Chairman of the APEC Business Advisory Council