

Asia-Pacific, African regions join forces to fight influenza

Times Reporters

Medical professionals from the Asia-Pacific and African regions met yesterday in Vientiane to consider how best to guard against future influenza pandemics.

On behalf of the Lao Ministry of Health, Head of the National Emerging Infectious Disease Coordination Office Dr Bounlay Phommassack said the discussion was timely and turned the spotlight on the need to share information and best practices.

"We will pool our experience to improve the second and third phases of the national plan to prepare for a possible influenza outbreak."

"Since the complexities of preventing and controlling an H1N1 pandemic are beyond our imagination, this workshop will bring together countries from the Asia-Pacific region to share their experiences and coping mechanisms so we can learn how to better integrate information into our pandemic preparedness plan," he said.

Some 45 participants from

Bangladesh, Cambodia, East Timor, Laos, the Maldives, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vanuatu and Vietnam are attending the four-day workshop and will discuss their respective country's experiences of influenza.

According to a press release from the US Embassy, the objective of the workshop is to provide senior civilian and military health planners with strategies to integrate civilian and military resources into contingency planning for major infectious disease outbreaks at national, provincial and district levels.

Representative from the US Centre for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance, Mr Andy Bates, said a workshop involving Asia-Pacific and African regions as well as the United Nations, held in Rome, Italy, last year was attended by only seven Asian countries because the H1N1 outbreak had just reached Asia at that time.

"All the countries who

could not attend last year's workshop in Italy have been invited to this workshop. Materials from the Rome workshop as well as additional lessons learned from last year's H1N1 outbreak will be covered in this year's workshop," Mr Bates said.

Laos will make a presentation on its newly instituted pandemic community surveillance network to other countries in the region.

"This is very important as this type of network may provide an opportunity to contain an infectious disease outbreak before it spreads to the general population," he said. "The reason why H1N1 spread so quickly outside Mexico last year was due to the lack of local surveillance systems." Military Medical Department Director General Colonel Dr Bounteum Bandavong from the Ministry of National Defence also attended the event. The Multinational Pandemic Influenza workshop was co-hosted by Laos and the US.

Country representatives share their experience of influenza.

