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Hon CHEUNG Yu-yan
Chairman of the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

and

Dr Hon Joseph LEE Kok-long,
Chairman of Panel on Health Services

Dear Sirs,

RE: Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene and Panel on Health Services

Thank you for your invitation letter of 17 November 2006. Unfortunately, as I have previously committed to speaking at the Keystone Symposia Conference on "Respiratory Viruses of Animals Causing Disease in Humans" I will be unable to attend your panel meeting in person. However, I would like to provide a written submission to provide some background information on avian influenza in this region.

In September 2006 I reviewed the findings from our surveillance network, which covers 6 provinces in southern China, to the WHO Working Group on Influenza Research at the Human and Animal Interface in Geneva. This same data was also reported to the corresponding authorities of the Central Government in October 2006. These findings indicate that H5N1 virus has become endemic and is continuing to evolve in this region, although the H5N1 genotype Z virus remains dominant. In

migratory birds, the Qinghai Lake outbreak changed the epidemiology in mid-2005, and this change signaled the progressive westward spread of Qinghai Lake viruses and their descendants to eventually reach Europe and Africa.

Surveillance over the past 24 months in southern China showed a peak in virus activity during the month of January, followed by a decline in virus activity in April. The situation is severe and not yet fully under control. During the past year, approximately 1,300 H5N1 isolates have been obtained from poultry in southern China. Prevalence is higher in domestic ducks and geese than in chickens, and highly pathogenic virus was being found in apparently healthy birds. Most of these isolates belonged to the dominant H5N1 genotype Z. In southern China, viruses related to the Fujian-like lineage of H5N1 genotype Z were found in 70% of the isolates and that figure has recently risen to 95%, indicating that, in southern China, Fujian-like viruses are replacing other virus lineages and becoming the dominant lineage within the genotype. In summary, even with a compulsory vaccination program in the surveillance region, H5N1 influenza appears to continue silently circulating in market poultry. This may therefore raise the possibility of further H5N1 human infection in this winter.

I hope this summary is helpful for your panel and, once again, I apologize for not being able to attend in person.

Yours Sincerely,

(signed)

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