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Fears raised over disease outbreaks

Thasong Asvasena

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With modern day's outbreaks like the 2009 flu and the E coli outbreak in Europe, insufficient pandemic preparedness can no longer be dealt with lightly while complacency by the government and society could prove too costly, according to a statement by the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) public health network released at a Bangkok workshop yesterday.

To come up with active plans based on likely scenarios in the next 30 years, although many sound too far-fetched or highly unfamiliar to most members of the public, the forum offered foresight into possible events in the future, and possible criteria for guidelines that could be utilised by authorities and public sector for use, in the long run.

Established in 1977 under the 46-member state Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) forum set up one year earlier, ASEF has successfully promoted mutual understanding and collaboration between the people of Asia and Europe through intellectual, cultural, and people-to-people exchanges.

It is now addressing health issues through a preparatory process titled ASEF-ASAP (Accurate Scenarios-Active Preparedness).

In inaugurating the ASEF-ASAP forum, Public Health Ministry deputy permanent secretary Dr Siriwat Tiptaradol welcomed the initiative and made requests for support from ASEF-ASAP to supply antivirals and personal protective equipment, research and development funding and technology transfer for countries lacking these things.

He also proposed a Public Health Emergency Fund for some member countries that could not afford essential antivirals especially flu vaccines, with rich countries in Asia expected to contribute more to show "good spirit".

To work out measures for future problems and health emergencies or crises linked to overpopulation and food shortage in the next three decades, worst-case scenarios were outlined in three brainstorming sessions held in three countries over the past nine months, to get the global public and governments used to the most real and scariest scenarios the world could face, in order to get advanced measures in place, before they occur.

In the three scenarios, anything bad is not beyond anticipation, ranging from political crises, street protests, public disobedience, or even major public health events including possible spread of zoonoses caused by humans and livestock living too near to each other as farmland has been replaced rapidly by urban development.