

Holidaymakers told to disseminate bird flu information in hometowns

Adianto P. Simamora

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Efforts to prevent the spread of avian influenza took a new direction Saturday, with campaigners appealing to holidaymakers to inform people in their hometowns about the deadly virus.

"As you go home to spend time with your families, I would like to remind you about the importance of sharing what you know about avian influenza with your loved ones," Johnny Seikaly, senior administrative officer at the USAID-funded Community-Based Avian Influenza Control (CBAIC), told holidaymakers at the Primajasa bus terminal in East Jakarta.

"Individually, we can not hope to contain and defeat

this virus, but working together we can create synergy that will help reduce the spread of avian influenza in Indonesia."

He made the statement after providing 21,000 seat covers with quizzes about avian influenza on them to bus operator Primajasa.

The covers also have tips about preventing the further spread of avian influenza painted on them, including the importance of wearing masks and gloves when handling sick birds.

Travellers are encouraged to send their answers to the quiz via SMS to 9386.

Primajasa operates 215 busses, and will transport approximately 33,000 holidaymakers during the Idul Fitri period to destinations including Sumatra, Banten,

West Java, East Java and Yogyakarta. Many of these provinces have reported cases of avian influenza.

More than 25 million people are expected to travel to their hometowns to celebrate Idul Fitri next week.

Seikaly said his office would develop more projects aimed at preventing the spread of bird flu next year.

"However, we can't do this alone. We need to work together," he said.

"One person changing their behavior is not enough, but if entire communities collaborate and change the way they look at bird flu, we can contain the spread of the virus."

USAID senior infectious diseases adviser Lisa Kramer said the program was also aimed at educating the

rural population about farm safety.

To date Indonesia has recorded 107 confirmed cases of the H5N1 virus, with 86 deaths — more than any other country in the world.

Experts fear the virus could mutate into a new form that spreads easily between humans, with the potential to kill millions.

Tri Satya Naipospos, deputy chief of the National Committee for Avian Influenza Control and Pandemic Preparedness, said that Idul Fitri would be an effective time to spread information about avian influenza.

"We hope holidaymakers will not only give Idul Fitri gifts to their relatives in rural areas, but also information about preventing the spread of the virus," she said.