

## Campaign against deadly cattle plague ending

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Rinderpest, capable of wiping out entire herds of cattle within days

**14 October 2010, Rome** - An ambitious global effort that has brought rinderpest, a deadly cattle plague, to the brink of extinction is ending all field activities, paving the way for official eradication of the disease.

It would be the first time in history that humankind has succeeded in wiping out an animal disease in the wild, and only the second time, after smallpox in 1980, that a disease has been eliminated thanks to human efforts.

Rinderpest does not affect humans directly, but its ability to cause swift, massive losses of cattle and other hooved animals has led to devastating effects on agriculture for millennia, leaving famine and economic devastation in its wake.

"The control and elimination of rinderpest has always been a priority for the Organization since its early days in its mission to defeat hunger and strengthen global food security," FAO Director-General Jacques Diouf said as ministers, animal health experts and partners gathered in Rome (13-14 October) for a Global Rinderpest Eradication Symposium.

The meeting got underway as representatives from many of FAO's member countries prepared to take part in the 15 October World Food Day 2010 observance, whose theme is "United Against Hunger."

"The disease has affected Europe, Asia and Africa for centuries and has caused widespread famine and decimated millions of animals, both domestic and wild. In the 1880s, rinderpest caused losses of up to one million head of cattle in Russia and central Europe," said Diouf.

When it entered Africa in the nineteenth century, it decimated millions of heads of livestock and wildlife and triggered widespread famine. It is estimated that in that pandemic alone, up to one-third of the human population of Ethiopia died of starvation as a result. The last known outbreak of rinderpest occurred in 2001 in Kenya.

A joint FAO/OIE announcement of global rinderpest eradication is expected in mid-2011, pending a review of final official disease status reports from a handful of countries to the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE).

"We are confident that the World Assembly of Delegates of the OIE will officially recognize all remaining countries as free from the disease in May 2011 and thus close on that day OIE Pathway activities for rinderpest eradication. The OIE programme was launched back in 1989 and has been extremely reliable in assessing the presence or absence of the virus in all countries worldwide. It should serve future ventures in eradicating other animal diseases," Dr Bernard Vallat, OIE Director General declared.

Participants of the symposium discussed lessons learned from international efforts to stamp out the disease, how to apply lessons learned to eradicate other diseases, and reviewed what remains to be done before and after a final declaration of eradication.

### **A global effort**

FAO has spearheaded a coordinated, global effort to study the pattern and nature of rinderpest, help farmers and veterinary services recognize and control the disease, develop and implement vaccination campaigns and, ultimately eradicate the disease within the framework of the OIE pathway.

That effort has involved a broad alliance of international partners such as the OIE, IAEA and donors, most recently under the Global Rinderpest Eradication Programme (GREP).

GREP was launched in 1994 as a global coordination mechanism that would

allow the international community to jointly undertake rinderpest control in a systematic and comprehensive way. It was the decisive, final push in a decades-long campaign of scientific research, field surveillance and vaccination of animals in the field.

"The extraordinary success of this programme would not have been possible without the united efforts and determined commitment of the governments of all affected and exposed countries, without the African Union's Inter-African Bureau on Animal Resources and the responsible regional organizations in Asia and Europe, without the donor agencies committed to this endeavor," said FAO Director-General Jacques Diouf.

Special gratitude was expressed to the European Union and other major donors as well as dedicated professionals in research institutions and bilateral and multilateral development agencies.

"Together we have defeated rinderpest. Together we are stronger. Together we will defeat hunger," concluded Jacques Diouf.

### **Devastating history**

Caused by a virus and spread by contact and contaminated materials, rinderpest has destroyed countless millions of cattle, buffalo, yaks and their wild relatives, with mortality rates in extreme cases reaching close to 100 percent.

Many centuries after it was first seen in Asia and Europe, rinderpest reached its height in the 1920s. At one time, the disease's footprint extended from Scandinavia to the Cape of Good Hope and from the Atlantic shore of Africa to the Philippine archipelago, with one outbreak reported in Brazil and another in Australia.

In the early 1980s, rinderpest was still ravaging livestock herds around the world, with devastating epidemics hitting South Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Losses in Nigeria in the 1980s totalled \$2 billion. A 1994 outbreak in northern Pakistan wiped out more than 50 000 cattle and buffalo before being brought under control with help from FAO and its partners.