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**INAUGURATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL
FOOD SAFETY AUTHORITIES NETWORK (INFOSAN)**

(Prepared by the World Health Organization)

1. On 13 October 2004, the World Health Organization (WHO) will announce the inauguration of the new International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN), which has been developed in cooperation with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), to promote the exchange of food safety information and to improve collaboration among food safety authorities at national and international levels. This introductory paper provides an overview of INFOSAN and its emergency component, INFOSAN EMERGENCY. Further details are available at the WHO Website: http://www.who.int/foodsafety/fs_management/infosan/en/.

Background

2. Food safety authorities all over the world have acknowledged that ensuring food safety must not only be tackled at the national level but also through closer linkages among food safety authorities internationally. Food safety problems discovered in one country often are of interest or concern in other countries. The rapid globalization of food production and trade has increased the potential likelihood of international incidents involving food contaminated with microbial or chemical hazards. It is therefore important to have a mechanism to exchange information on both routine and emerging food safety issues, in particular rapid access to information in case of food safety emergencies. This has both health and trade dimensions, as food is one of the most important commodity trade groups.

3. While food safety authorities in some countries are easy to identify and access, this is certainly not the case for all countries. As most developing countries are either food exporters or importers, their inclusion in an operational and interactive network is considered essential. Recent international conferences such as the FAO/WHO Global Forum for Food Safety Regulators in January 2002, the FAO/WHO Pan-European Conference on food Safety and Quality in February 2002 and the FAO/WHO Regional Conference on Food Safety for Asia and the Pacific, Seremban, Malaysia, 24-27 May 2004 have specifically identified the need for action in this area, with an emphasis on developing countries. In addition, the World Health Assembly (WHA) of WHO in May 2000 adopted a resolution calling for improved communication among WHO and its Member States on matters of food safety. Consequently, the need for an international food safety network has been widely endorsed by the international health and food safety communities.

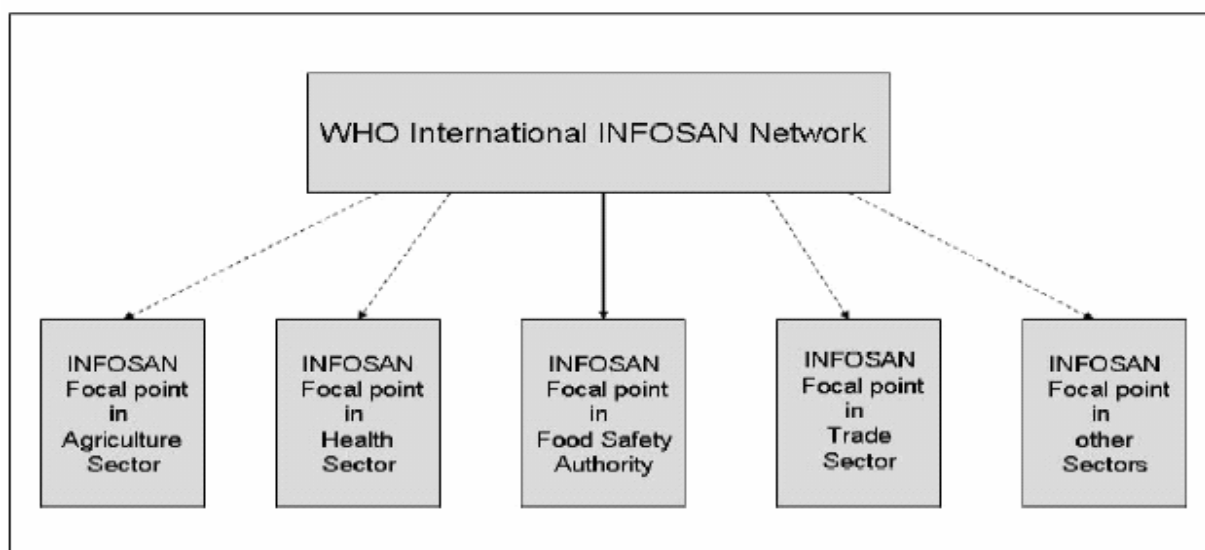
4. In addition, the WHA in May 2002, in expressing serious concern about health emergencies posed by natural, accidental and intentional contamination of food, requested WHO to provide tools and support to Member States to increase their capacity to respond to such emergencies. In response in January 2003, WHO published a report on the terrorist threats to food including guidance for establishing and strengthening prevention and response systems. The report pointed to the establishment of an international food safety

emergency network as one of the basic preparedness measures that needed to be taken. In this regard, it should be noted that the food safety emergency component of INFOSAN is intended to complement and support the existing WHO alert and response system in combating the international spread of disease outbreaks by rapid identification, verification and communication of food safety threats in order to minimize the health impact of foodborne outbreaks and prevent further disease spread by the implicated food. In July 2004, the FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission adopted a text entitled *Principles and Guidelines for the Exchange of Information in Food Control Emergency Situations*, which includes the designation of official contact points for information exchange in each country. The Codex text gives WHO the responsibility to maintain a list of food safety emergency contact points, which for all intents and purposes, will be the list of emergency contact points maintained under INFOSAN. It should be noted that the revised WHO International Health Regulations envisages the strengthening of information exchange between national authorities through WHO in cases of international health emergencies and is likely to include food and other products, which may pose serious international public health risks.

INFOSAN and INFOSAN EMERGENCY

5. In March 2004, WHO and its Regional Offices took the first steps in establishing INFOSAN. Through WHO entry points usually located in the Ministry of Health, WHO Representatives have requested the official designation of one or more INFOSAN Focal Points and one INFOSAN EMERGENCY Contact Point. INFOSAN is intended to be an information network for the dissemination of important information about global food safety issues. In addition to the WHO Food Safety Newsletter published every two months, examples of information that might be disseminated through INFOSAN include: acrylamide in food (June 2002), WHO's 20 questions on genetically modified foods (October 2002), WHO's report on terrorist threats to food (Jan 2003), food safety aspects of SARS (April 2003), semicarbazide in infant foods (September 2003), *E. sakazakii* in powdered milk (February 2004) and Salmonella in almonds and tahini (June 2004).

6. The INFOSAN Focal Points are expected to disseminate INFOSAN information to interested parties and stakeholders. While it is desirable to have a single INFOSAN Focal Point, several Focal Points may be identified in a country if food safety authorities are located in several agencies. In this context, the operational definition for *food safety authorities* includes such authorities as those involved in food legislation, risk assessment, food control and management, food inspection services, laboratory services for monitoring and surveillance, and food safety information, education and communication, across the so-called farm-to-fork continuum. Therefore, INFOSAN Focal Points may be located in several ministries, such as ministries of health, commerce, agriculture and trade. See figure below for an example of how this may be structured in a country with multiple agencies involved.



7. INFOSAN EMERGENCY Contact Points are expected to alert food safety authorities to foodborne disease outbreaks or food contamination events of international public health significance. Only one emergency contact point has been requested per country in order to facilitate rapid and reliable communication with governments in cases where timeliness is critical. However, depending upon the nature of a particular incident, an INFOSAN EMERGENCY Contact Point may delegate the responsibility for direct contact with WHO to facilitate communication. Clearly, rapid, reliable and authoritative information on food emergencies is the essential basis not only for prevention and response measures but also maintaining consumer confidence in the food supply. Relevant examples from the past might include the Chernobyl accident (1986), the dioxin contamination of animal-derived food in Belgium (1997), and the BSE outbreak and ban on feeding materials in the United Kingdom (1996). Potential future terrorist incidents would likely be notified under this network. INFOSAN EMERGENCY will be activated only during major international incidents involving the imminent risk of serious injury or death to consumers.

8. INFOSAN EMERGENCY Contact Points will be expected to accept some notification and response responsibility and to facilitate the communication of urgent messages during food safety emergencies. The Contact Point should also be able to report on behalf of the government in the case of an emergency. Because of the potential sensitivity of the information exchanged, communication on this network would be considered confidential. INFOSAN EMERGENCY will be closely linked to the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (see <http://www.who.int/csr/sars/goarn/en/index.html>) at both the national and international levels. INFOSAN EMERGENCY Contact Points will be automatically part of INFOSAN and be kept informed about more routine food safety related activities.

PROGRESS TO DATE:

9. On 13 October 2004, the Food Safety Department (FOS) of WHO will officially inaugurate the International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN), including its emergency component (INFOSAN EMERGENCY). About 100 countries have already designated INFOSAN Focal Points and INFOSAN EMERGENCY Contact Points (see list of countries below). Further efforts are underway to encourage the remaining WHO Member States to designate persons for the network. In addition, an external advisory system is under development to provide timely expert advice and guidance to INFOSAN and INFOSAN EMERGENCY. A guide for INFOSAN EMERGENCY Contact Points has been drafted and will be sent to governments for comment. Development of a secure Website for INFOSAN EMERGENCY Contact Points is ongoing. Finally, WHO would like to acknowledge the contributions and support from the governments of Australia, Ireland, Spain, United Kingdom and the United States of America and would like encourage other Member States with an interest in

being more involved in this area to contact the Director of the WHO Food Safety Department (schlundtj@who.int).

INFOSAN and INFOSAN EMERGENCY - Countries registered as of 6 October 2004

Andorra	Ghana	Peru
Antigua and Barbuda	Guinea	Philippines
Australia	Guinea-Bissau	Poland
Austria	Hungary	Republic of Korea
Bangladesh	India	Republic of Moldova
Barbados	Indonesia	Romania
Belgium	Iran (Islamic Republic of)	Russian Federation
Belize	Ireland	Samoa
Benin	Jordan	Saudi Arabia
Bhutan	Kenya	Seychelles
Bolivia	Lao People's Democratic	Sierra Leone
Brazil	Latvia	Slovakia
Bulgaria	Lebanon	Slovenia
Burkina Faso	Liberia	Solomon Islands
Cambodia	Lithuania	Spain
Cameroon	Luxembourg	Sri Lanka
Canada	Madagascar	Sudan
Cape Verde	Malaysia	Swaziland
Central African Republic	Mali	Thailand
Chile	Malta	The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
Congo	Marshall Islands	Togo
Cook Islands	Mauritius	Tokelau
Costa Rica	Micronesia (Federated States of)	Turkey
Cuba	Monaco	Turkmenistan
Czech Republic	Mongolia	Tuvalu
Democratic Republic of the Congo	Mozambique	Uganda
Egypt	Myanmar	United Republic of Tanzania
El Salvador	Namibia	United States of America
Estonia	Nauru	Uruguay
Ethiopia	Nepal	Uzbekistan
Fiji	Netherlands	Vanuatu
Finland	Nigeria	Viet Nam
Georgia	Niue	Zimbabwe
Germany	Oman	
	Palau (Republic of)	