GENEVA, 17 February – A small group of global public health and influenza experts at a WHO-convened meeting reached **consensus** on two urgent issues related to the **newly created H5N1 influenza viruses**:

extending the temporary moratorium on research with **new laboratory-modified H5N1 viruses** and recognition **that research** on naturally-occurring H5N1 influenza virus **must continue** in order to protect public health.

“Given the high death rate associated with this virus -- 60% of all humans who have been infected have died -- all participants at the meeting emphasized the high level of concern with this flu virus in the scientific community and the need to understand it better with additional research," says Dr Keiji Fukuda, Assistant Director-General of Health Security and Environment for the World Health Organization. “The results of this new research have made it clear that H5N1 viruses have the potential to transmit more easily between people underscoring the critical importance for continued surveillance and research with this virus.”

WHO convened the meeting as a first step to facilitate the discussion of differing opinions that have arisen in recent months after two research groups, one in the Netherlands and the other based in the United States, have created versions of the H5N1 influenza virus which are more transmissible in mammals than the H5N1 virus that occurs naturally.

The experts at the meeting included lead researchers of the two studies, scientific journals interested in publishing the research, funders of the research, countries who provided the viruses, bioethicists and directors from several WHO collaborating-center laboratories specializing in influenza.

The group also came to a consensus that delayed publication of the entire manuscripts would have more public health benefit than urgently partially publishing.

“There is a preference from a public health perspective for full disclosure of the information in these two studies. However there are significant public concern surrounding this research that should first be addressed,” says Fukuda.

Two critical issues are to increase public awareness and understanding of this research through communications and the review of biosafety and biosecurity aspects raised by the new laboratory-modified H5N1 influenza virus. WHO will continue discussion with relevant experts to move this forward.

Broad issues raised, but not limited to, these research studies will be discussed at future meetings convened by WHO soon with participation by a broader range of experts and interested parties relevant to these issues.