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**HEALTH:
Threats Get Vietnam Rights to Make Bird Flu Drug**

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HO CHI MINH CITY, Nov 9 (IPS) - Threats by Vietnam that it would begin unlicensed manufacture of the anti-viral drug 'Tamiflu' to contain a possible pandemic of bird flu seem to have induced the patent holder Roche to grant the country the right to produce the drug locally.

The Swiss pharmaceutical giant also made commitments to the Ministry of Health on Tuesday, to make Tamiflu production available within two months.

Representatives of Roche and the ministry met late October but failed to arrive at a satisfactory agreement on local manufacture of the drug.

That led an exhausted Cao Minh Quang, the ministry's director of pharmaceuticals administration to declare on Monday that "if we can't negotiate, the ministry would disregard copyright to authorise domestic manufacture of the drug for non-commercial purposes".

Vietnam has become one of the world's biggest breeding grounds for the bird flu virus. Its fenceless, free-range rearing, communal live markets and backyard slaughterhouses place people close to the flocks and expose birds to anything that flies by.

Last year, Vietnam slaughtered more than 55 million birds after the deadly H5N1 strain first emerged, suffering losses worth 190 million US dollars or 0.5 percent of the country's gross domestic product. But since there were still 220 million more fowl in the country, Hanoi invested heavily in inoculations.

Two pilot projects were implemented but both failed. In one pilot area, poultry in only 38 out of 127 communes had been vaccinated. In the second, one million fowl were still to be injected.

Hoang Van Nam, deputy director in the department of animal health, noted that as the poultry vaccine needed to be kept constantly cold and could be delivered only by syringe, it was very difficult to get it to "backyard chickens".

He added that in both pilot projects his officers found it hard to distinguish between birds that had been vaccinated and those that had slipped through the programme. "No one was supposed to eat or sell birds that had been vaccinated for 30 days after the first injection, but without records or tagging, this rule was unenforceable," Nam said.

The result is that uncontrolled "feathered poultry" (living ducks and chickens) and fresh eggs flooded markets, while preparations made from chicken or chicken blood were sold freely at street side restaurants in Hanoi, HCM City and other urban centres.

"In many places, people are not fully aware of the dangers of the bird flu epidemic," Deputy Prime

Minister Nguyen Tan Dung told the press on Monday and asked for help in building better public awareness of the dangers posed by bird flu.

The same day, local newspapers warned that the practice of using chicken droppings to feed fish in southern Vietnam was threatening millions of people in this city. Each day, some 100 tonnes of chicken droppings are thrown into Tri An lake, whose waters flow into Dong Nai river and run through the country's biggest city.

"Dropping chicken excrement into Tri An lake during the period when bird flu is evolving into a pandemic is extremely dangerous," Le Hoang Sang, deputy director of the Ho Chi Minh City's Pasteur Institute, was quoted by newspapers as saying.

About seven million people in Ho Chi Minh City depend on water pumped in from the Dong Nai River and treated for daily use.

In January, a 9-year-old boy died from bird flu in the Mekong Delta province of Tra Vinh after he contracted it while swimming in water in which the bodies of infected poultry had been thrown.

A report on the Guardian Unlimited website dated Oct. 15 suggested that the current bout of bird flu in northern Vietnam had begun to mutate and that there existed the danger of a strain emerging that could be passed among humans.

At least eight human clusters have been discovered in north Vietnam this year; a number of victims had no contact with diseased poultry and were likely to have been infected by sick siblings, friends or in hospital.

Vietnam wants to be proactive in the fight against a possible pandemic by producing enough Tamiflu to be provided free to patients. Tamiflu, which does not cure the disease but reduces its impact, is currently difficult to obtain following increasing demand around the world.

Vietnam has a stock of only 600,000 Tamiflu capsules donated by Taiwan. The country could have 30 million of the tablets that the World Health Organisation (WHO) has reserved for any Asian nation affected by a large-scale outbreak of the epidemic.

This stock remains too small for a population of nearly 90 million, compelling the authorities to look at producing the anti-viral drug without a licence, should an epidemic occur, Quang said.

Health Minister Tran Trung Chien said the ministry would use all means at its disposal to produce sufficient flu drug through three local companies, with the only foreseeable difficulty being the sourcing of basic raw material.

Several countries in Asia have already shown interest in producing Tamiflu. On Monday, Taiwan officials said they would open talks with the Swiss company and the manufacturer has indicated willingness to work with the government of China to boost production.

Roche representatives in Vietnam said that if the epidemic occurred on a large scale in the country, the firm would mobilise the medicine from its stocks or from other countries, ensuring Vietnam had enough drugs to prevent the epidemic.

But Quang said that the government "would protect people's health before respecting copyrights." (FIN/2005)