

Overview of the International Food Safety Authority Network (INFOSAN) in the Member States of the WHO South-East Asia Region



**World Health
Organization**

Regional Office for South-East Asia

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Abbreviations

ASEAN RASFF	Regional Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed
BFSN	Bangladesh Food Safety Network
DFTQC	Department of Food Technology and Quality Control
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FOS	Department of Food Safety and Zoonoses and Foodborne Diseases
FSEER	Food Safety Emergencies Response
FSSAI	Food Safety and Standards Authority of India
GORAN	Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network
IHR	International Health Regulations
INFOSAN	International Food Safety Authority Network
INRASFF	Indonesia Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed
IPHN	Institute of Public Health Nutrition
MFDA	Maldives Food and Drugs Authority
NADFC	National Agency of Drug and Food Control
NADFC	National Agency of Drug and Food Control
RASFF	Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed
WHA	World Health Assembly
WHO	World Health Organization

1. Background

Food safety authorities worldwide have the task of ensuring food safety and preventing foodborne diseases, both of which are of importance to national as well as international public health. As the volume and magnitude of the extensive global trade in fresh and processed food items increase, food authorities need to be able to identify and respond to incidents related to food safety and to communicate information on food safety to all stakeholders within the shortest possible time. A mechanism to exchange information and share experiences internationally so that food safety issues can be managed more effectively and efficiently is, therefore, a necessity.

In May 2000, the World Health Assembly adopted a resolution calling for improved communication among the World Health Organization (WHO) and its Member States on matters of food safety. The 2002 World Health Assembly expressed serious concern about the health emergencies posed by the natural, accidental and intentional contamination of food, and requested WHO to provide tools and support to the Member States to increase their capacity to respond to emergencies.

In 2004, the International Food Safety Authority Network (INFOSAN) was established by WHO, in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). INFOSAN provided a mechanism to facilitate sharing of information between the global networks of 177 national food safety authorities. INFOSAN is currently operated and managed by the Department of Food Safety, Zoonoses and Foodborne Diseases (FOS), WHO, Geneva.

INFOSAN has provided an important platform for the rapid exchange of information in the case of food safety crises and for sharing of data on both routine and emerging food safety issues. The network's goals are to (i) promote rapid exchange of information during events related to food safety; (ii) facilitate sharing of information on important issues related to food safety that are of global interest; (iii) promote partnership and collaboration between countries; and (iv) help countries strengthen their capacities for effective risk management in the sphere of food safety.

In July 2004, the FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission adopted a text called "Principles and guidelines for the exchange of information in food control emergency situations", which included the designation of official contact points for the exchange of information in each country. The Codex text gave WHO the responsibility of maintaining a list of food safety emergency contact points under INFOSAN.

An inaugural meeting of the INFOSAN advisory group was held in April 2006 and the INFOSAN Secure Website was launched in November 2007. In May 2010, the World Health Assembly adopted resolution WHA 63.3 on "Advancing food safety initiatives" to reinforce the importance of INFOSAN, and encouraged all Member States to participate in INFOSAN and the activities related to it through timely sharing of data, information and knowledge. The resolution also supported the strengthening of the emergency functions of INFOSAN, while recognizing the network as a critical component of WHO's preventive and emergency operations related to food safety.

A national INFOSAN focal point is nominated by a Member State to serve as a liaison between the national counterparts and the INFOSAN global network. Several national focal points may be identified in a Member State if the components of the food safety programme are distributed between several ministries or departments. INFOSAN focal points may, therefore, be located in the health, commerce, agriculture and trade ministries, among others.

The role of the national INFOSAN focal points is to ensure timely and accurate two-way sharing of INFOSAN notes and messages, WHO guidelines and other important information on food safety issues among all stakeholders. INFOSAN information notes are developed by the INFOSAN secretariat six to twelve times annually. The INFOSAN focal point needs to be in a position to consolidate comments from its counterparts and return to the INFOSAN secretariat a single response that reflects the national collective view. Through this mechanism, the INFOSAN secretariat can provide advice or put the country in contact with another country (via the country's INFOSAN focal point) which may have expertise in the area in question.

Every Member State has officially designated an INFOSAN emergency contact point to notify INFOSAN of international food safety problems and facilitate the communication of urgent messages during food safety emergencies. The INFOSAN emergency contact point facilitates the identification, assessment and management of food safety events under WHO's International Health Regulations (IHR) and is closely linked to the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN). INFOSAN emergency contact points are expected to be aware of outbreaks of foodborne disease or food contamination events in their country and inform the INFOSAN secretariat of any events of significance to international public health.

The INFOSAN focal points are encouraged to work together on various food safety issues. Focal points also provide a point of contact for each stakeholder and can be used nationally and internationally as a means of making initial contact. INFOSAN provides a secure platform for communication which allows those in one country to interact with and learn from those in other countries, leading to an improvement in international cooperation. During food safety events of international concern, critical information, such as the international distribution of contaminated foods, possible public health consequences and risk management options, is shared by one Member State with others through the INFOSAN mechanism. Recent examples include melamine contamination of milk and other food and feed products, dioxin contamination of pork products, Ebola Reston-like virus in pigs, and contamination of peanuts and peanut products with *Salmonella typhimurium*.

The first global INFOSAN meeting of the network's members was held in Abu Dhabi, the UAE, in December 2010, when representatives of the Member States and international experts discussed issues related to food safety. The purpose of the meeting was to provide the Member States a forum to discuss the requirements of the network, and to develop a plan to enhance INFOSAN and strengthen the capacities of the Member States to participate in the network. The outcomes of the meeting included an improvement in the sense of community among the members. Further, the meeting came up with practical recommendations for enhancing communication and collaboration. It also identified opportunities to strengthen core capacity at the national and regional levels

for promoting participation in INFOSAN. Five Member States of WHO-SEAR (Bhutan, Indonesia, Nepal, Myanmar and Thailand) participated in this meeting.

2. Regional situation of INFOSAN

To strengthen and encourage the participation of the South-East Asia Member States in INFOSAN, an assessment of the status of INFOSAN was undertaken on the basis of a review of the data available, as well as telephone interviews with the WHO country office focal points for food safety and the national INFOSAN focal points.

The information available on the status of INFOSAN in eight Member States of the WHO SEA Region (Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Timor-Leste) is presented in the annexure. In the eight Member States, officials from the Ministry of Health have been designated as the national INFOSAN focal points. While the activities of the INFOSAN in these nations have progressed over the past years, the range and quality of the activities have varied. Several Member States are faced with the problem of limited financial and human resources, along with deficient core capacity. The information available also indicates that most Member States do not have standard operating procedures for communicating food safety alerts and disseminating information on and responding to food safety emergencies. WHO and other partners will have to maintain technical assistance to Member States to improve the national INFOSAN.

3. Country activities

Bangladesh

The Institute of Public Health Nutrition (IPHN) of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare is the national INFOSAN emergency contact point in Bangladesh. The network is currently inactive and does not carry out the routine activities required of the national INFOSAN mechanism. To enhance the food safety programme across the country, the Bangladesh Food Safety Network (BFSN), under the project "Improving food safety, quality and food control in Bangladesh" (administered by the FAO), was formally launched at the "Safe food festival" in Dhaka in October 2011.

Bhutan

The nutrition programme under the Department of Public Health, Ministry of Health, is the national emergency contact point in INFOSAN. The network is currently inactive and is not carrying out the routine activities required under the national INFOSAN mechanism due to cross-cutting areas on food safety that fall under the mandate of the Bhutan Agriculture Food Regulatory Authority, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry.. Furthermore, there is also the need to develop a standard operating procedure for dissemination and collection of food safety alerts.

India

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare is the INFOSAN focal point in India. Not much INFOSAN activity has been

undertaken as India joined the network only in February 2011. However, information from INFOSAN has been disseminated to various agencies so that appropriate action can be taken. During the recent Japanese nuclear crisis (Fukushima), as a precautionary measure, India decided to test samples of food articles such as seafood, fruits, vegetables and fresh meat, particularly fresh produce exported from Japan after 11 March 2011, for radioactive contamination. Capacity-building is required in India to promote further active involvement in the INFOSAN system. The existing constraints lie in the areas of identifying the emerging hazards, assessing risks which are of global importance and of importance to India, and communicating and disseminating information to all the stakeholders in the case of emergencies.

Indonesia

In Indonesia, the Director for Food Safety Surveillance and Extension, the National Agency of Drug and Food Control (NADFC), acts as the INFOSAN emergency contact point. He works in collaboration with other INFOSAN focal points from the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Affairs and National Standard Agency. INFOSAN Indonesia has served as a source of information and necessary resource materials during emergencies such as the melamine contamination of food in 2008 and the Fukushima nuclear crisis in 2011. WHO supported Indonesian participation in the first global INFOSAN meeting in Abu Dhabi in December 2010. Food Safety Emergencies Response (FSER) has not developed fully in Indonesia. However, NADFC is currently developing the Indonesia Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (INRASFF) for responding to food safety problems. The INRASFF is now a pilot project. The FSER needs to be developed keeping multisectoral needs in mind and should have a wider scope than the INRASFF. INFOSAN Indonesia will be a main component of the existing food safety alert system in Indonesia (INRASFF). Eventually, INRASFF will be a part of the Regional Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (ASEAN RASFF). In Indonesia, the legal aspects still need to be dealt with, and human resources, infrastructure and technical assistance have to be developed. Further strengthening of national coordination and international networking is necessary.

The Maldives

The Maldives Food and Drugs Authority (MFDA), Ministry of Health and Family, is the INFOSAN focal point in the Maldives. It sends feedback to the INFOSAN secretariat regarding the alerts raised by INFOSAN, and shares information on INFOSAN and food safety alerts with food safety officers. WHO supported the participation of the national representative at the first global INFOSAN meeting in 2010. There is a need for a clear standard operating procedure for the dissemination and collection of food safety alerts in the country, particularly in view of the decentralization of the government administration. The MFDA is currently in the process of developing its internal standard operating procedures.

Myanmar

In Myanmar, the Food and Drug Administration, Ministry of Health, has been designated as the INFOSAN contact point. In 2009, a major successful action was taken against the

use of non-permitted colour dyes (Rhodamine B in fish paste and Auramine O in pickled tea leaves). This was combined with appropriate health education messages through the media. Action was taken in 2008 against the contamination of milk and milk products with melamine. To ensure a rapid response to information from INFOSAN and to narrow down the information gap, the access of the national authorities to the Internet should be improved.

Nepal

The Department of Food Technology and Quality Control (DFTQC) of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives has been appointed the national INFOSAN focal point in Nepal. Its major activities are the dissemination and communication of information on various food safety issues to all the stakeholders concerned. The important activities that have been undertaken so far include addressing the melamine contamination of milk from China and radionuclide contamination of food products from Japan. Action has also been taken on issues raised by the European Commission's Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) pertaining to mould-infested cheese spread from France, the presence of erucic acid in lemon pickle from Nepal and India, and the presence of gluten of wheat flour (an allergen) in buckwheat from Nepal. More work is required to develop the INFOSAN information centre for effective management of information.

Sri Lanka

The Department of Environment and Occupational Health, Ministry of Health, is responsible for the dissemination of INFOSAN information related to food safety, nationally as well as globally. Sri Lanka is working on extending its partnership with WHO in the sphere of INFOSAN activities. The country's progress in the sphere of food safety became evident recently when it demonstrated its ability to face challenges arising from local disasters, emergency situations and external issues, such as the radionuclide contamination resulting from the nuclear crisis in Japan. Limited funds and lack of technical capacity are two constraints faced by those involved in the INFOSAN activities in Sri Lanka.

Thailand

The Food Safety Operation Centre under the Ministry of Public Health was designated as the national INFOSAN focal point in 2008. The INFOSAN committee of Thailand has recently been authorized to decide on the management of emergency incidents related to food safety. The INFOSAN emergency contact point of Thailand is a member of the IHR Committee. The Food Safety Operation Centre has recently undertaken the task of translating relevant INFOSAN information into the Thai language. This is being done to ensure that all national, provincial and district staff and members of the administration are familiar with the working of INFOSAN. A website is being developed on domestic food security to support INFOSAN communication and emergency response. INFOSAN Thailand received support from WHO to complete a project entitled "Strengthening coordination among food safety authorities working on prevention and control of unsafe food and foodborne diseases" and organized the second INFOSAN Thailand meeting. The national

INFOSAN committee intends to develop its capacity further in the area of communication among the national and international stakeholders on risks to food safety.

Timor-Leste

The Environmental Health Department, Ministry of Health, has been nominated as the national INFOSAN focal point. The current activities are confined to responding to epidemic/outbreak threats resulting from foodborne illnesses and the dissemination of INFOSAN alerts. The Ministry of Health intends to establish a formal INFOSAN mechanism in collaboration with all partners. The Environmental Health Department takes the lead of the national food safety working group, which intends to continue to advocate the establishment of a national board for food safety monitoring.

Annex 1

Current status of the International Food Safety Authority Network in the South-East Asia Region

Country	National INFOSAN focal point	Current status
Bangladesh	Dr Shakhawat Hossain, Director, Institute of Public Health Nutrition Bangladesh, Mohakhali , Dhaka-1212 Tel: +880-29898523 Fax: +880-29880273 e-mail: iph@ld.dghs.gov.bd	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The INFOSAN mechanism is currently inactive. • The Bangladesh Food Safety Network (BFSN) was launched to enhance food safety activities in the country.
Bhutan	Bhutan Agriculture and Food Regulatory Authority (BAFRA) Ministry of Agriculture & Forests Thimphu, Bhutan Tel: +975-2-327031 Fax: +975-2-327032	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • INFOSAN mechanism is currently inactive. • Need to develop a standard operating procedure for dissemination and collection of food safety alerts.
India	Mr Anil Mehta, Deputy Director and Liaison Officer, and National Codex Contact Point, Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare), FDA Bhawan, Kotla Road, New Delhi-110002, India e-mail: codex-india@nic.in Tel: +91-11-23220997	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The recently created Food Safety and Standards Authority of India [FSSAI] joined the INFOSAN network in February 2011. • Information from INFOSAN continues to be disseminated to various agencies so that appropriate action can be taken. • During the nuclear crisis in Japan, India decided to test samples of food articles for radionuclide contamination. • The major challenges are the identification of emerging hazards, assessment of risks, and ensuring effective communication with and dissemination of information to all the stakeholders in cases of emergency.
Indonesia	Dr Halim Nababan, Director for Food Safety Surveillance and Extension, The National Agency of Drug and Food Control (NADFC), Percetakan Negara No. 23, Jakarta Pusat, 10560, The Republic of Indonesia Tel: 622142803576 Mobile: +628161352602 Fax: 622142878701 e-mail: halim.nababan@pom.go.id	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indonesia has been a member of INFOSAN since 2004. • It participated in the 2011 meeting on enhancing food safety information exchange and emergency response capacity to support participation in INFOSAN held in Korea. Indonesian participants attended the global meeting of INFOSAN in Abu Dhabi in 2010. • INFOSAN Indonesia has responded to food safety emergencies, i.e. melamine contamination in 2008 and radionuclide

Country	National INFOSAN focal point	Current status
		<p>contamination of food from Japan in 2011.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • INRASFF has been developed to respond to food safety problems in Indonesia. • Capacity-building, technical assistance and strengthening of stakeholders are required to improve the networking.
The Maldives	<p>Ms Mariyam Shabeena Ahmed, Maldives Food and Drug Authority, Sosun Magu, Malé, the Maldives Tel: +96003014303, +9603014208, e-mail: foodsafetydivision@health.gov.mv shabeena@health.gov.mv shabyna@gmail.com</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The current activities consist of disseminating INFOSAN alerts to food safety officers, including at border entry points, and sending feedback to the INFOSAN secretariat about the action taken on the alerts. • Representatives from the country participated in the first global INFOSAN meeting in 2012. • Internal standard operating procedures are being developed for effective functioning of INFOSAN through the decentralized administration. • The food safety staff has limited technical capacity to respond adequately to INFOSAN alerts.
Myanmar	<p>Dr Kyaw Lin, Director, Food and Drug Administration, Department of Health, Ministry of Health, Office No. (47), Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar Tel: +95 67 431134 Fax: +95 67 431134 e-mail: linkyawdr@gmail.com</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • INFOSAN Myanmar responded to melamine contamination of milk and the use of non-permitted colour dye (Rhodamine B in fish paste and Auramine O in pickled tea leaves). • A campaign was launched in 2011 to spread awareness among the general population and educate them on health. • Samples of tea leaves collected in market surveys were tested and found to be free of Auramine O dye. • There is a need to improve communication between the agencies involved in the food safety programme in Myanmar. • The staff involved in the food safety programme needs better access to the Internet.
Nepal	<p>Ms Jiwan Prava Lama, Director General, Department of Food Technology and Quality Control, Babarmahal, Kathmandu, Nepal Tel: +977-1-4262369 Fax: +977-1-4262337 e-mail: jjiwanlama@gmail.com; dgdftqc@mail.com.np</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • INFOSAN Nepal addressed the emergencies of melamine contamination of milk from China and radionuclide contamination of food from Japan. • The laboratory facilities used for food safety issues have been strengthened. • Action was taken on issues raised by the RASFF pertaining to cheese spread from France, lemon pickle from Nepal and India, and buckwheat from Nepal. • There has been timely monitoring of imported food products to which attention has been

Country	National INFOSAN focal point	Current status
		<p>drawn by the Rapid Alert System.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is an inadequacy of human as well as other resources. • The level of awareness regarding food safety is low. • There are plans to develop an INFOSAN information centre to strengthen the dissemination of information and the communication system. • Plans are afoot to develop a food control system based on risk assessment, with a focus on consumer protection. • Efforts are being made to build the capacity of the Department of Food Technology and Quality Control to ensure that the communication system is prompt and allows for networking among all the stakeholders.
Sri Lanka	<p>Dr T.B. Ananda Jayalal, Director, Environment and Occupational Health, Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka Tel: 0112672004; e-mail: jayalal313@yahoo.co.uk</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Efforts are under way to strengthen collaboration between the different units involved in the food safety programme in the country. • Efforts are being made to improve collaboration with WHO and other international partner agencies. • Recent challenges to food safety emanating from local disasters and emergency situations have been met successfully. • Further improvement is needed in the technical capacity of the staff.
Thailand	<p>Ms Jongkolnee, Vithayarungruangsi, Director of Food Safety Operation Center, Room 709-710, DMSc Building No. 8, Ministry of Public Health, Tiwanon Rd, Muang, Nonthaburi 11000, Thailand Tel: +662-9659730, +6681-9331768 Fax: +662-5883020 e-mail: infosanthailand@moph.mail.go.th foodsafety_1@hotmail.com</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The INFOSAN guidebook has been translated into Thai and disseminated to all focal points and programme staff in the country. • The INFOSAN focal point is a member of the IHR Committee. • INFOSAN Thailand focal points were expanded from 3 divisions up to 9 divisions in the food supply chain authority. • The second INFOSAN Thailand meeting was organized in Bangkok in 2011. • An INFOSAN Thailand committee with decision-making powers for management of emergencies is being established. • The domestic food security website is being improved to enhance INFOSAN communication and emergency response.

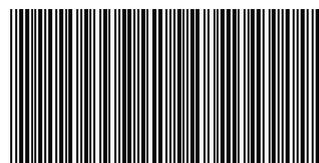
Country	National INFOSAN focal point	Current status
Timor-Leste	Mr Ivo Cornelio Lopes Guterres, Head of Environmental Health Department, Ministry of Health, Caicoli, P.O. Box 374, Dili, Timor- Leste Tel: +670-3339412 Mobile: +670-7245707 e-mail: ivoguterres@gmail.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The current activity consists of responding to epidemic / outbreak threats from food-borne illnesses and disseminating INFOSAN news.• The Ministry of Health intends to establish an INFOSAN unit in the near future in collaboration with other partners.• The Environmental Health Department takes the lead of the national food safety working group, which will continue to advocate the establishment of a national food safety board.• Efforts are under way to establish a national food safety laboratory.

Food safety authorities worldwide have the task of ensuring food safety and preventing foodborne diseases, both of which are of importance to national as well as international public health. In 2004, the International Food Safety Authority Network (INFOSAN) was established by WHO, in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). INFOSAN has provided an important platform for the rapid exchange of information in the case of food safety crises and for sharing of data on both routine and emerging food safety issues. To strengthen and encourage the participation of Member States for the South-East Asia Region in INFOSAN, an assessment of the status of INFOSAN at the country level was undertaken on the basis of a review of available data and interactions with colleagues in the Member States. The findings from the assessment are included in this report.



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