

General Conference of the IAEA- Side Event on “Rinderpest Freedom Celebration”, 20 September 2011
Statement of the Permanent Representative of Italy, Ambassador Gianni Ghisi

Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are here today to celebrate the declaration of the global eradication of Rinderpest and to acknowledge the role of the IAEA in contributing to this unprecedented success. Rinderpest is the first animal disease to be eradicated in the world, and the second global disease after smallpox.

After the official recognition by the OIE that all the 198 countries and territories in the world were free of Rinderpest, as it has been mentioned, a High Level Commemorative Ceremony has been held in Rome during the 37th FAO Conference, which included an International Symposium on the accomplishment and the obligations of Member States with the Italian financial support. I congratulate the organizers of this second “Freedom celebration”, hosted in Vienna by the IAEA. The General Conference offers indeed an appropriate setting to continue to focus on this remarkable success, to be inscribed also in the IAEA “Atom for Peace” mission, and showing how the Agency can contribute to the MDG’s global strategy.

There is in fact a lot to celebrate. Rinderpest affected Europe, Asia and Africa for centuries causing swift, massive losses of cattle and other hoofed animals, leading to devastating effects on agriculture and leaving famine and economic devastation, social disruption and loss of human life in its wake. It has been a long way to go. The starting point was in Italy beginning of the XVIII Century, where studies on the nature of this cattle disease enabled Italian Scientists to devise a practicable way of controlling the disease: this is the first reason why I have the honour to represent my Country in this Forum. The second reason is the longstanding Italian contribution to the international cooperation in the global efforts towards Rinderpest eradication, as our Minister of Health, Prof. Ferruccio Fazio has underscored in his speech to the FAO Conference.

The first breakthrough in the fight against Rinderpest came with the discoveries of Bernardo Ramazzini, Professor of Practical Medicine at the University of Padua whose thorough investigations of the disease, adhering to strict scientific principles have placed him as the “Father of Veterinary Epidemiology”. The second development took place in 1713, when the plague had reached the Roman territory, including the city itself. His Holiness Pope Clement XI instructed his personal physician, Giovanni Maria Lancisi, to investigate the plague that was raging and to prescribe measures for its suppression. Lancisi identified the plague as “Pestis bovilla” (Rinderpest) and formulated recommendations for its containment by banning the use of cures, the slaughter of infected animals and sick and in-contact animals immediately, the burial of whole animals and the inspection of meat, and restriction of livestock movements. These measures were the only useful ones for over two hundred years, before vaccination became an alternative additional means of control. (It might be of some interest to note that the Italian Government has recently financed the reprinting of Lancisi’s book “De Bovilla Peste”).

In order to combat this cattle plague, it was realized that there was a need for trained manpower and appropriate infrastructure that could deal with the problem of Rinderpest and this led to the formation of national veterinary schools, starting with the first establishment in Lyons, in France, soon to be followed by other countries in Europe.

In 1924, recurrent Rinderpest outbreaks in some parts of Europe, led to the creation of the *Office International des Epizooties* (OIE), by 28 founding Countries, among which Italy. Rinderpest has also been a significant catalyst for the birth and development of modern veterinary science and its eradication is a monumental victory for the discipline.

As I said at the beginning, the role of Italy in the fight against Rinderpest has continued in the time. Over the last 50 years, our Ministry of Health has been engaged in international cooperation for a world free from this devastating disease. The Italian Centre of excellence in this field, where the virus sequestration is carried out, is the “Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale” of Teramo. The Institute serves as the National Reference Centre for Exotic Diseases, and has cooperated and collaborated with different countries in the fight against Rinderpest.

The eradication of the Rinderpest virus has been described as the biggest achievement in veterinary history so far, and one which will save the lives and livelihoods of millions of the poorest people in the world, because it highlights what can be done by people working together.

In this respect, the contribution of the IAEA in improving the capacity of Member States to monitor the disease by providing the training and infrastructural development for carrying out sensitive and specific, nuclear related diagnostic tests to monitor the progress of eradication in the various national and global programs played a major role in enabling Member States to proceed along the OIE pathway to declaration of freedom from Rinderpest.

Being Italy a longstanding supporter of the Joint FAO-IAEA Programme, I am particularly happy to acknowledge the important role played by the Animal Production and Health Section and its Seibersdorf Laboratory in creating scientific networks and in adding new tools resulting in the eradication of Rinderpest. I take also this opportunity to commend the many staff members of the Joint FAO/IAEA Division and their trainees involved in the various campaigns who contributed so much to improving the livelihoods of the smallholder farmer.

Coming to the conclusion, let me express my Government conviction that the success achieved with Rinderpest could be a move forward to eradicate other diseases, starting from “*Peste des petits ruminants*” that is causing lot of suffering in Africa by constraining the livelihoods and endangering the food security, in particular of the poor and marginalized members of society, who rely on small ruminants for food and income.

Finally, on behalf of my Minister of Health, I wish to express special gratitude to the FAO, OIE, IAEA and other major donors, as well as to the dedicated professionals in research institutions and bilateral and multilateral development agencies. Gratitude and encouragement, because together we have defeated Rinderpest and we can defeat other diseases, together we have to fight and eradicate hunger and poverty.

Thank you.