

WHO raises swine flu alert to 5 out of 6

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The World Health Organisation raised its flu alert on Wednesday signalling a swine flu pandemic is "imminent" as a toddler in the United States became the first to die of the disease outside of Mexico .

"All countries should immediately now activate their pandemic preparedness plans," WHO chief Margaret Chan said as she raised the alert to five on a scale of six following WHO health expert talks in Geneva.

"The international community should treat this as an opportunity to ramp up the response. After all, it is really all of humanity that is under threat during a pandemic," she added.

Phase five, one step short of a full pandemic, is characterised as a "strong signal that a pandemic is imminent and that the time to finalise ... the planned mitigation measures is short," the WHO global emergency planning says.

But Chan stopped short of ordering the production of a pandemic vaccine, a move which would have meant disrupting the production of seasonal flu vaccines.

So far seven deaths have been confirmed in Mexico - the epicentre of the current outbreak - although Mexican officials have said the new multi-strain virus is suspected in 159 deaths. More than 1,300 people are also in hospital with flu symptoms, of which 49 are confirmed cases of swine flu.

The United States has the next largest number of confirmed cases - 91 spread across 10 states - and a Mexican toddler became the first person outside Mexico to succumb to the disease after travelling to visit relatives in Texas.

Tests have also confirmed that a US Marine, who has not visited Mexico , has fallen ill with swine flu and about 30 other Marines he came in contact with at the marine base at Twentynine Palms in southern California have been quarantined, the Marine Corps said.

Chan said WHO experts decided to raise the alert level because not only were there "sustained" human to human transmission cases in Mexico , but also in the United States.

And she called for help for developing nations in battling this new global health emergency.

One of those who died in Mexico was confirmed on Wednesday to have been a Bangladeshi who had been in the country for six months. Authorities are searching for his brother who is believed to have left after visiting Mexico , and is suspected of being sick.

The United States has already declared a public health emergency, and Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano said the government was prepared to cope with a "full-fledged pandemic" of swine flu if necessary.

"We have been preparing all along as if this is going to be stage six," she told reporters. "We are preparing for the worst, hoping for the best."

The acting head of the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, Richard Besser, said new H1N1 infections had been confirmed in Arizona, Massachusetts, Michigan and Nevada. There were also six suspected cases in Maryland.

The WHO said there were 13 confirmed cases of swine flu in Canada, five in Britain, four in Spain, three each in New Zealand and Germany, two in Israel and one in Austria. Italy was also investigating some 20 suspected cases.

Foreigners were rushing to leave Mexico on Wednesday fearing more flight cancellations as countries move to try to contain the virus, and the outbreak shattered the country's tourism industry. The lack of tourists was felt most sharply in the capital, the heart of the epidemic, with eateries, museums and the nearby Aztec pyramids ordered closed.

"We arrived from Peru last night. We were going to spend 10 days in Mexico but now we're going to miss it all. We're leaving as fast as possible," said Frenchwoman Aude Tersac, 36.

Although the WHO said it had not seen "any evidence that anyone is getting infected from pigs," Egypt ordered the "immediate" cull of all the estimated 250,000 pigs in the country.

The first possible cases in Africa arrived when South Africa's health ministry said it was testing two people who had recently returned from Mexico .

Major tour agencies and cruise lines have already suspended trips to Mexico , while Argentina and Cuba have barred flights to and from the country.

But the European Commission said it would hold off on introducing a ban on flights to Mexico as requested by France to await the outcome of an EU health ministers meeting in Luxembourg on Thursday.

Some have suggested that those who died in Mexico were treated too late or with insufficient drugs, or that perhaps the strain mutated into something less virulent when it left the country.