

UN cranks up global pandemic alert level to phase 4 due to swine flu spread

Global alarm as swine influenza virus spreads

27 April 2009 – With increasing numbers of people contracting the deadly swine flu virus, the United Nations health agency today elevated the international pandemic alert to phase 4, on a six-point scale, for the first time since the current warning system was introduced in 2005 in response to the avian influenza crisis.

The increase in the alert level signals an outbreak of human to human transmission in at least one country, which increases the risk of a global epidemic, but does not mean a pandemic is inevitable. “Given the rapidly evolving situation [it was felt] that it was important to give a strong signal to countries that now is a good time to strengthen preparations for possible pandemic influenza,” World Health Organization ([WHO](#)) Assistant Director-General Keiji Fukuda told reporters in Geneva.

Mr. Fukuda explained that the emergency committee of health experts, set up to deal with the recent outbreak of the swine flu virus, raised the alert level because the virus had already spread to the United States, Mexico, and Canada, with a verified case in Spain.

He underscored the importance for authorities to protect the health of individuals and to focus their efforts on mitigating the disease rather than attempt to stop its spread, stressing that “containment is not a feasible consideration.”

WHO would not recommend the closing of borders or the restriction of travel, which would have little to no effect in stopping the movement of the virus, Mr. Fukuda said.

Phase 5 of the WHO pandemic alert levels is characterized by human-to-human spread of the virus into at least two countries in one WHO region.

“The declaration of Phase 5 is a strong signal that a pandemic is imminent and that the time to finalize the organization, communication, and implementation of the planned mitigation measures is short,” says the agency’s website.

Noting that flu season is now kicking into gear in the southern hemisphere, Mr. Fukuda said it is prudent to continue production of general influenza vaccines that prevent severe illness and death from seasonal influenza.

However, the emergency committee also advised WHO to “take all steps to facilitate production and development of a swine flu influenza vaccine that would be effective in [treating] people against this new virus.”

A new vaccine would normally take four to six months to develop and for the production of initial batches. The manufacture of significant amounts of the vaccine would require further months, by which time the threat of pandemic could be over, warned Mr. Fukuda.

In an unscheduled [address](#) to the press this afternoon, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told reporters “The UN system is responding, quickly and effectively, with the Director General of the World Health Organization [WHO], Dr. Margaret Chan, taking the lead.”

Announcing that the [World Bank](#) and other UN development and humanitarian agencies will provide funding to countries needing additional resources to combat an epidemic, Mr. Ban said that the poorer nations must not be hit disproportionately hard by a potential health crisis.

“So far, our response has been an example of multilateral cooperation at its best. I am confident that it will continue to be so,” he added.

Meanwhile, a team of experts from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization ([FAO](#)) is helping to determine if the new virus strain has a direct connection to pigs.

FAO will also dispatch a team of animal health experts to Mexico this week to help the Government assess the origin and transmission of the infection in the pig production sector.

So far, the spread seems to be solely humans to human. Evidence that the virus entered the human population directly from pigs has not yet been established.

“There is no evidence of a threat to the food chain; at this stage it is a human crisis and not an animal crisis, but we have to be alert and prepared,” said FAO Chief Veterinary Officer Joseph Domenech.

He added that FAO and others must first “ascertain if the new strain is circulating in pigs, establish if there are any direct linkages between the illness in the human population and animals and explain how this new virus has obtained genetic materials from human, bird and pig influenza strains.”

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