

Swine flu fears hit Wimbledon as toll hits 70,000

AFP

LONDON (AFP) – Swine flu fears hit the Wimbledon tennis championships on Monday as WHO figures showed global cases leaping past 70,000 while Australian researchers said a vaccine could be ready in months.



With the death toll from the pandemic at 311 and total cases at 70,893, according to the WHO, more countries reported their first A(H1N1) infections and Indonesia planned to ask some people arriving there to wear masks.

The worries at Wimbledon came with play intensifying as the tournament entered its second week. Organisers said some staff members have reported "flu-like" symptoms but the competition would continue as normal.

Ian Ritchie, the chief executive of the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club, which runs the annual grand slam in southwest London, sent a message to staff to inform them of the situation.

Club sources told AFP that a handful of ball boys and ball girls were affected but nobody had been confirmed as having contracted the virus.

Venus Williams, the defending Wimbledon ladies' singles champion, said she was not worried.

"I just got a letter. I haven't read it. But I guess there's sicknesses all around. Hopefully the players won't get sick," the US tennis champ said.

"Hopefully our immune systems are strong enough. That's what they're there for. We're going to all put ours in use, take vitamin C, keep playing, and call it a day."

More than 4,000 swine flu cases have been diagnosed in Britain, and a hospital said Monday a nine-year-old girl had become the third person with the disease.

The girl had underlying health problems and it was unclear whether swine flu had contributed to her death, Birmingham Children's Hospital said.

Elsewhere, the virus first discovered in late March continued its spread.

According to the World Health Organisation figures released Monday, the United States showed the largest increase in cases, bringing the total to 27,717, including 127 deaths -- but that count may be massively low.

US health authorities said Friday that at least one million people in the United States have had swine flu, or around 50 times more than the number of cases officially reported.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) arrived at its figure based on computer models and surveys of communities known to have been hard hit by the new flu strain.

Some affected countries no longer keep track of all cases, according to the UN health agency, while others do not always report them.

Australian researchers said Monday a swine flu vaccine could be ready in months as the country, the worst-hit in Asia-Pacific, reported two more deaths linked to the virus, taking the total to six.

University of Queensland scientists said they had produced the country's first batch of a vaccine developed in the United States using caterpillar cells.

Researcher Anton Middelberg said the company behind the FluBlok vaccine -- Connecticut-based Protein Sciences Corporation -- planned to run clinical human trials in the United States, Mexico and Australia.

"It all depends on the regulatory process but I'd say we are months away from a swine flu vaccine," Middelberg said.

Highlighting the virus's wide-ranging spread, Nepal, the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius and Kenya all reported their first cases on Monday.

In Indonesia, the health minister said the government planned to ask all those arriving from swine flu-affected countries to wear masks for at least three days.

The presence of the A(H1N1) virus was confirmed in Indonesia only last week and so far four of the eight known cases have been foreigners.

Health Minister Siti Fadilah Supari said the government had no intention of enforcing the precaution, which could seriously damage the country's stuttering tourism industry.

"There'll be no penalty if people don't wear them. You can't expect people to wear masks when they're swimming," Supari said.

Image: AFP/File – A scientist prepares a DNA test for the A(H1N1) virus. Swine flu fears have hit the Wimbledon tennis ...