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## **UN health chief cautions H1N1 may not be conquered until 2011**



WHO staff prepare boxes of antiviral drugs to treat the H1N1 virus for dispatch to countries [File Photo]

29 December 2009 – The moderate impact of the H1N1 pandemic is the “best possible health news of the decade,” but the head of the United Nations World Health Organization (**WHO**) today warned that more people – particularly in the southern hemisphere – could become sick this season and that it would be premature to say the health risk is over.

“It is too early for us to say that we have come to an end of the pandemic influenza worldwide,” WHO Director-General Margaret Chan told reporters at a year-end press conference in Geneva.

“There is no basis for any allegations that this is not a pandemic. We are seeing million and millions of people infected with this new virus and we are fortunate that many of these people make recovery.”

Ms. Chan added that it would be prudent for WHO and member states to continue to monitor the pandemic evolution for up to 12 more months.

According to the agency, more than 6,000 people have died from the H1N1 since the outbreak began in April, compared with up to 500,000 who die annually from the regular flu. Pregnant women, children under two and people with underlying conditions such as respiratory problems are particularly vulnerable.

The WHO head said that in a background of a fragile economy where many people suffer from chronic diseases, a severe instead of a moderate pandemic could have brought momentum for health development "to a grinding halt and reversed the hard-earned against that the world collectively has achieved in the last ten years."

She added that Member States and WHO partners have made steady but fragile progress in internationally-agreed goals in the past decade, and must work hard to maintain the momentum of progress and to catch up in areas that are lacking.

Among the priorities for the next year, Ms. Chan called on countries to continue to push for progress on the Millennium Development Goals (**MDGs**), eight ambitious anti-poverty targets with a 2015 deadline, especially in improving maternal mortality.

She noted possible roadblocks caused by weak and insufficiently-funded health care systems. She also cautioned against threats from policies outside the direct control of the health sector, such as from the financial or the agricultural sectors.

On a positive note, she highlighted the new breed of South-South and North-South collaborations on research and development that have yielded "badly needed vaccines and drugs, particularly for diseases of the poor."

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