

Asia on alert after flu threat spreads

April 26 2009

Asian health officials went on alert Sunday as a flu strain that has killed dozens of people in Mexico appeared to have spread to New Zealand, underscoring warnings of a potential pandemic.

Governments across the region, which has in recent years been at the forefront of the SARS and [bird flu](#) epidemics, stepped up checks at airports and urged the public to be on guard for symptoms of the new multi-strain flu.

Ten New Zealand students who recently travelled to Mexico are "likely" to have contracted swine fever, [Health](#) Minister Tony Ryall said Sunday -- the first suspected cases in the region of more than three billion people.

They were among a group of three teachers and 22 students from Auckland who returned home on Saturday. Thirteen students and one teacher had displayed flu-like symptoms and were quarantined in their homes while undergoing tests.

"Ministry of Health officials advise me there is no guarantee these students have [swine influenza](#), but they consider it likely," Ryall said.

Samples from the students, who already tested positive for influenza A, were being sent to a World Health Organisation (WHO) laboratory in Melbourne, Australia to determine whether they had [swine flu](#), Ryall said.

Mexican officials said the death toll from the new strain had probably risen to 81, while 10 people were believed infected in the United States and there were two possible cases in France.

The WHO warned Saturday that the virus had the potential to become a pandemic, labelling the current outbreak "a public health emergency of international concern."

In Japan, airports tightened checks on passengers arriving from Mexico, with quarantine officials giving out face masks and using thermography imaging cameras to screen passengers for signs of fever.

Health officials handed out leaflets to those headed for Mexico and the United States, urging them to wear face masks and wash their hands regularly, while a health ministry hotline attracted some 400 calls.

Agriculture minister Shigeru Ishiba appealed for calm, saying that the drug Tamiflu "is very effective. We have enough stockpiles in Japan."

South Korea followed suit, ordering all passengers on flights from virus-hit nations to pass through a strengthened quarantine check with a test kit at the airports.

Authorities also put Mexican and US pork in quarantine to check for the disease.

Australia urged people who had recently returned from Mexico and had developed flu-like symptoms to seek medical advice.

China and Hong Kong bore the brunt of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003 that killed nearly 800 people, most of them in Asia, bringing air travel here to a near-standstill and battering the region's economies.

The same year, the H5N1 strain of [bird flu](#) re-appeared in Asia.

It has since killed 257 people, according to the World Health Organisation, and officials have long warned that the virus could become a global pandemic if it mutates into a form that is easily transmissible between humans.

The Chinese health ministry said it was "paying close attention" to the situation, studying inspection and quarantine measures to guard against the spread of the latest [flu strain](#).

In Hong Kong, health officials said checks at border crossings had been stepped up and that airlines had been asked to broadcast messages on all flights coming direct from affected areas.

Indonesia, which has recorded the most deaths from bird flu of any country, said it was checking that thermoscanners were working at all ports and airports.

Thailand's Public Health Minister, Witthaya Kaewparadai, said authorities were "monitoring the epidemic closely" and advised people travelling to Mexico and the United States to take advice from the ministry.

Highlighting the potential role of international air travel in spreading the virus, a British Airways cabin crew staff member was being treated in a London hospital with flu-like symptoms after arriving on a flight from Mexico City.

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