

WHO says swine flu moving closer to pandemic

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An Egyptian Health worker sprays chemicals to disinfect a local pigs farm in Cairo, Egypt Monday, April 27, 2009. Egyptian health authorities are examining about 350,000 pigs being raised in Cairo and other provinces for swine flu. (AP Photo/Mohammed Ahmed)

(AP) -- The World Health Organization warned Wednesday that the swine flu outbreak is moving closer to becoming a pandemic, as the United States reported the first swine flu death outside of Mexico, and Germany and Austria became latest European nations hit by the disease.

In Geneva, WHO flu chief Dr. Keiji Fukuda told reporters that there was no evidence the virus was slowing down, moving the agency closer to raising its [pandemic](#) alert to phase 5, indicating widespread human-to-human transmission.

But he said the health body not yet ready to move the pandemic alert level up from its current level of 4, which means the virus is being passed among people. Phase 6 - the highest in the scale - is for a full-scale pandemic.

As fear and uncertainty about the disease ricocheted around the globe, nations took all sorts of precautions, some more useful than others.

Britain closed a school after a 12-year-old girl was found to have the disease. Egypt slaughtered all its pigs and the central African nation of Gabon became the latest nation to ban pork imports, despite assurances that [swine flu](#) was not related to eating pork.

Cuba eased its flight ban, deciding just to block flights coming in from Mexico. And Asian nations greeted returning airport travelers with teams of medical workers and carts of disinfectants, eager to keep swine flu from infecting their continent.

In Mexico City, the epicenter of the epidemic, the mayor said Wednesday the outbreak seemed to be stabilizing and he was considering easing the citywide shutdown that closed schools, restaurants, concert halls and sports arenas.

Swine flu is suspected of killing more than 150 people in Mexico and sickening over 2,400 there.

Dr. Richard Besser, the acting chief of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said 91 cases have now been confirmed in 10 states, and health officials there reported Wednesday that a 23-month-old Mexican boy had died in Texas from the disease.

Across Europe, Germany confirmed three swine flu cases and Austria one, while the number of confirmed cases rose to five in Britain and ten

in Spain.

WHO conducted a scientific review Wednesday to determine exactly what is known about how the disease spreads, how it affects human health and how it can be treated.

Dr. Nikki Shindo, a WHO flu expert, said the review would focus on the large trove of data coming from Mexico and from a school in New York City that has been hard-hit by the outbreak.

Germany's national disease control center, the Robert Koch Institute, said the country's three cases include a 22-year-old woman hospitalized in Hamburg, a man in his late 30s at a hospital in Regensburg, north of Munich, and a 37-year-old woman from another Bavarian town. All three had recently returned from Mexico.

Austria's health ministry said a 28-year-old woman who recently returned from a monthlong trip to Guatemala via Mexico City and Miami has the virus but is recovering.

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said health officials were ordering extra medicine and "several million more" face masks to deal with the virus.

British media reports, citing an unidentified European surgical mask manufacturer, said the U.K. was seeking 32 million masks to protect its health workers from a possible pandemic.

"We've decided to build stocks of anti-virals, from 35 million to 50 million," Brown said, adding that the government had put in enhanced airport checks and was going to mail swine flu information leaflets to every household in Britain.

In addition to a couple in Scotland who got swine flu on their Mexican honeymoon, new British cases included a 12-year-old girl in the southwest English town of Torbay. Brown said her school had been closed as a precaution.

He said the other two cases were adults in London and in Birmingham. All three had visited Mexico, were receiving anti-viral drugs and were responding well to treatment, Brown said.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy met with Cabinet ministers to discuss swine flu and his health minister said France will ask the European Union to suspend flights to Mexico.

The U.S., the European Union and other countries have discouraged nonessential travel to Mexico. Cuba suspended all regular and charter flights from Mexico to the island but was still allowing airlines to return travelers to Mexico.

New Zealand's number of swine flu cases rose to 14, 13 of them among a school group that recently returned from Mexico. Officials say the swine flu strain infecting the students is the same as that in Mexico. All were responding well to antiviral drugs and in voluntary quarantine at home.

New Zealand has 44 other possible cases, with tests under way.

Mexico was taking drastic measures to fight the outbreak. It closed all archaeological sites and allowed restaurants in the capital to only serve takeout food in an aggressive bid to stop gatherings where the virus can spread. Schools remained closed until at least May 6.

A regional beach soccer championship in Mexico was postponed and all Mexican first-division soccer games this weekend will be played with no

audiences. Cruise lines were avoiding Mexican ports and holiday tour groups are canceling holiday charter flights there.

The Philippine health chief appealed to dozens of Filipino legislators to abandon plans to visit Las Vegas to cheer for boxing idol Manny Pacquiao - even though Las Vegas is more than 300 miles (480 kilometers) from the Mexican border.

Egypt's government ordered the slaughter of all pigs in the country as a precaution, though no swine flu cases have been reported there. Egypt's overwhelmingly Muslim population does not eat pork, but farmers raise up to 350,000 pigs for its Christian minority.

In Australia, officials were testing more than 100 people with flu symptoms for the virus and the government gave health authorities wide powers to contain contagious diseases.

"(We can make) sure that people are isolated and perhaps detained if they don't cooperate and are showing symptoms," said Health Minister Nicola Roxon.

Associated Press Writers around the world contributed to this report.

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