

Nations say they are ready for swine flu pandemic

June 12 2009, by Talek Harris

Nations around the world said they were ready to combat the spread of the swine flu virus Friday, urging people not to panic after the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic.

WHO officials stressed that the designation of a "moderate" [pandemic](#) did not mean the number of deaths from the A(H1N1) influenza virus -- currently at 144 worldwide -- would spike, and did not recommend closing any borders.

But officials around the world called for caution, saying preventative measures and vigilance would be the best way to halt the spread of the virus, which has already infected nearly 29,000 people in 74 countries.

"I think in terms of preparedness, we're okay," Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said Friday, after his government opted not to raise the national flu alert level.

"Influenza, in any given year, can be a problem in any community. This is a strong form of influenza and we need to just be very careful and we're doing that on a daily basis."

Australia is the fifth-worst affected country in the world, after the United States, Mexico, Canada and Chile. The decision by the WHO to declare a pandemic came after officials determined the virus was spreading beyond the Americas.

So far more than 1,300 people in Australia have been diagnosed with [swine flu](#) including several top sports stars. Four people remain in intensive care.

In the United States -- which accounts for nearly half of all cases worldwide -- officials said Washington was ready to tackle the virus.

"We acted aggressively to stay ahead of the virus as it spread across the country. Now our challenge is to prepare for a possible return in the fall," Health Secretary Kathleen Sebelius said in a statement.

In Mexico, the epicentre of the outbreak and where the vast majority of deaths have occurred, Health Minister Jose Angel Cordova said the virus was under control, noting: "It won't disappear but we'll see a few cases."

So far, no deaths have occurred outside the Americas.

In Geneva Thursday, WHO chief Margaret Chan urged calm after the UN body raised its alert level to top level six, saying the designation of a pandemic "does not imply we will see increase in number of deaths or very severe cases.

"Quite on the contrary, many people having mild disease will recover without medicine in some cases, and it is good news, but the tendency to move into complacency is our biggest concern," she said.

WHO Assistant Director General Keiji Fukuda warned the pandemic could last up to two years.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon said WHO's announcement was not "a cause for alarm" as it reflected the geographical spread of the disease, but the world needed to be prepared.

Hong Kong authorities Thursday ordered all primary schools in the city to be closed for two weeks after the first cluster of local swine flu cases was found in the Chinese territory.

But residents of the city, where about 300 people died during the SARS outbreak in 2003, remained unfazed by the WHO's announcement.

"Not many people are dying, they just feel ill. SARS was different," said 36-year-old Kevin Ku, a supervisor at a mobile-phone shop.

Officials in India, Indonesia and Japan said the countries had taken precautions and would remain vigilant against a possible second wave of flu infections.

European Union officials Thursday promised measures to reduce the impact of swine flu as Spain said 22 schools in the Madrid region had been hit by the virus.

Following the WHO announcement, the Red Cross and Red Crescent societies said they were mobilising to respond to the pandemic.

The last flu pandemic came in 1968-69 after an outbreak of the H3N2 viral strain, which originated in Hong Kong and went on to kill at least one million people.

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