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Concern grows over H1N1 outbreak in Bolivia

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An epidemic of H1N1 flu has infected almost 900 people and claimed 11 lives in Bolivia, health officials said Tuesday.

Although most of the cases occurred in the last few weeks, the outbreak does not rise to the level of a national epidemic, officials said.

"At the national level, the situation is under control. The most affected area is in the west," Johnny Rada, director of the ministry of health's epidemiology service, told AFP.

According to official tallies, 873 cases have been reported across the country, of which 606 are in the western department of La Paz and 60 in the department just south of it, Oruro.

There have also been 167 cases reported in the large eastern department of Santa Cruz, and 36 in central Cochabamba department.

A health alert has been issued for La Paz and Oruro, which, according to Rada, will permit health workers to intensify preventative measures.

Deputy Health Minister Martin Maturano also urged Bolivians to take precautions, such as eating well and frequently washing their hands.

Bolivian authorities have not said whether the strain of the virus originated as swine or avian flu -- in other words whether it first spread to humans from pigs or birds.

In 2009, an H1N1 epidemic erupted in Mexico and spread into a worldwide pandemic that caused at least 17,000 deaths.

Bolivia's current outbreak has primarily affected young children, the elderly, and those whose systems are already weakened by illness or chronic health conditions such as high blood pressure or diabetes.

Eight of the deaths were identified in the department of La Paz department, while the remaining three were in the eastern department of Santa Cruz.

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