

Flu virus spurs epidemic fears

MEXICO CITY: A unique strain of swine flu is the suspected killer of dozens of people in Mexico, where authorities closed schools, museums, libraries and theatres in the capital on Friday to try to contain an outbreak that has spurred concerns of a global flu epidemic.

The worrisome new virus — which combines genetic material from pigs, birds and humans in a way researchers have not seen before — also sickened at least eight people in Texas and California, though there have been no deaths in the United States.

“We are very, very concerned,” World Health Organisation spokesman Thomas Abraham said. “We have what appears to be a novel virus and it has spread from human to human... It’s all hands on deck at the moment.”

The outbreak caused alarm in Mexico, where more than 1,000 people have been sickened.

Residents here donned surgical masks and authorities ordered the most sweeping shutdown of public gathering places in a quarter century.

It might already be too late to contain the outbreak, a prominent US pandemic flu expert said on Friday.

Given how quickly flu can spread around the globe, if these were the first signs of a pandemic, then there were probably cases incubating around the world already, said Dr Michael Osterholm at the University of Minnesota.



Commuters wearing face masks to prevent infection by the swine flu virus in Mexico City on Friday. An outbreak of the deadly swine flu in Mexico and the United States has raised the spectre of a new virus against which much of humanity would have little or no immunity. — AFP picture

“Hundreds and thousands of travellers come in and out (of here) every day,” Osterholm said. “You’d have to believe there’s been more unrecognised transmission that’s occurred.”

There is no vaccine that specifically protects against swine flu, and it was unclear how much protection current

human flu vaccines might offer.

A “seed stock” genetically matched to the new swine flu virus had been created by the US Centers for Disease Control, said Dr Richard Besser, the agency’s acting director.

If the government decides vaccine production is necessary, manufacturers will need

that stock to get started.

Authorities here urged people to avoid hospitals unless they had a medical emergency, since hospitals are centres of infection.

They also said Mexicans should refrain from customary greetings such as shaking hands or kissing cheeks.

At the international airport

here, passengers were questioned to try to prevent anyone with flu symptoms from boarding airplanes and spreading the disease.

Epidemiologists are particularly concerned because the only fatalities so far were in young people and adults.

The eight US victims recovered from symptoms that

were like those of the regular flu, mostly fever, cough and sore throat, though some also experienced vomiting and diarrhoea.

US health officials announced an outbreak notice to travellers, urging caution and frequent handwashing, but stopping short of telling Americans to avoid Mexico.

The World Bank estimated in 2008 that a flu pandemic could cost US\$3 trillion (RM10.78 trillion) and result in a nearly five per cent drop in world gross domestic product.

The World Bank has estimated that more than 70 million people could die worldwide in a severe pandemic.

Meanwhile, WHO chief Margaret Chan arrived in Geneva yesterday to oversee the agency’s handling of the swine flu outbreak.

Chan broke off a visit to Washington to return to WHO’s Strategic Health Operation Centre, where she was briefed before an emergency committee meeting yesterday to consider whether to raise the pandemic alert level or issue travel advisories, said spokesman Gregory Hartl.

Two flu drugs, Tamiflu and Relenza, seem effective against the new strain.

Roche, the maker of Tamiflu, said the company was prepared to immediately deploy a stockpile of the drug if requested.

Both drugs must be taken early, within a few days of the onset of symptoms, to be most effective. — AP