

Mexican flu

alert

HEALTH MINISTRY ACTS
TO PREVENT ENTRY
OF DEADLY STRAIN

of 20 confirmed cases of swine flu and will screen visitors arriving from infected countries, officials said.

The US Department of Health and Human Services "will declare today (Sunday) a public health emergency in the United States," Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano said.

Asian health officials, meanwhile, have gone on alert and urged the public to be vigilant yesterday.

Governments across the region, which has in recent years been at the forefront of the SARS and bird flu epidemics, urged the public, and especially travellers, to be on guard for symptoms of the new multi-strain of swine fever.

"The public do not have to worry with the situation going on in Mexico and America as the authorities in the countries affected are taking steps with the cooperation of the WHO to control and eradicate the epidemic from escaping the country," said Ismail.

"Collaborative and cooperative efforts in information sharing and prevention measures are being undertaken by the Health Ministry along with the WHO, and the public will be informed from time to time," he said and urged the public to heed official advice.

"The public can find out more about epidemic by calling either 05-8881 0200 or 05-8881 0500. A website will also be set up this week."

In New Zealand, Health Minister Tony Ryall said yesterday 10 students who recently travelled to Mexico are "likely" to have contracted swine fever.

In the first suspected swine flu case in the Middle East, a 26-year-old Israeli man has been hospitalised in Netanya on returning from Mexico, hospital officials told AFP.

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

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

South Korean health, agriculture and foreign ministry officials held an emergency meeting to discuss the issue, while in China, the health ministry said it was "paying close attention" to the situation.

China and Hongkong bore the brunt of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome in 2003 that killed nearly 800 people, most of them in Asia. The same year, the H5N1 strain of bird flu re-appeared in Asia.

It has since killed 257 people, according to WHO, 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 WHO warned on Saturday that the virus had the potential to become a pandemic, labelling the current outbreak "a public health emergency of international concern".



Cleansing ritual ... A tourist wearing two face masks receiving a cleansing during prehispanic dances devoted to the sun, moon, water and soul in Mexico City.

PETALING JAYA: The Health Ministry is taking immediate action to keep out the lethal Mexican flu strain which has killed scores of people, health director-general Tan Sri Dr Mohd Ismail Merican said yesterday.

"Based on the current situation as reported by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as well as recommendations made by them, the Health Ministry will:

- » activate an operations room under the Department of Disease Control to monitor the situation of the swine flu epidemic in co-operation with WHO to ensure that proactive measures are taken to protect Malaysians;

- » direct all medical practitioners to alert the nearest District Health Office if they have treated any case showing influenza-like symptoms or severe pneumonia with a history of visiting Mexico, California or Texas after April 17;

- » monitor for swine flu symptoms at all entry points to the country for visitors or Malaysians who had visited the three places after April 17; and

- » issue media statements from time to time to inform Malaysians of the actions being taken by the government.

The United States yesterday declared a public health emergency amid an outbreak