

World runs scared

Panic spreads, economy hit

NEW YORK: The swine flu outbreak is unleashing a side effect the global economy is in no condition to handle. Fear.

Travellers are cancelling or delaying trips to Mexico. Yesterday, Cuba became the first nation to ban all flights to its neighbour. China, Russia and South Korea have banned imports of some North American pork, despite assurances that the flu is not spread through meat. Investors just starting to regain their nerve have again caught the jitters.

The threat of a pandemic comes just as the world economy is showing the barest glimmerings of what analysts say might be the light at the end of what remains a long, dark tunnel.

"This is another negative shock which the economy cannot afford," said Jay Bryson, global economist at Wachovia Corp.

President Barack Obama asked Congress for US\$1.5 billion (RM5 billion) in emergency funds to fight the disease.

In Mexico City, cancelled events and closed movie theatres, night clubs, museums and other establishments are costing at least US\$57 million a day, according to city's Chamber of Trade, Services and Tourism.

That's a 36 per cent drop in revenue generated by tourism and services in the Mexican capital, chamber president Arturo Mendicuti said.

China, the third-biggest market for exports of US pork, has banned shipments of the meat from California, Texas and Kansas, along with those from Mexico. Russia and South Korea have announced similar measures.

The bans caused consternation for US pork farmers.

"We have everybody saying pork is safe to eat and this isn't in the swine herd, definitely

SNAPSHOT

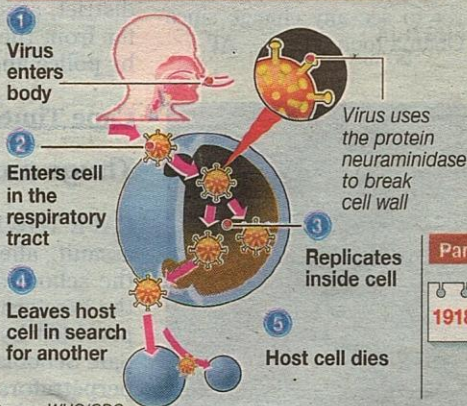
The influenza virus

The flu virus constantly changes to beat the immune systems of potential hosts

Influenza

- Attacks 5-15 per cent of the global population annually
- Kills up to 500,000 people in high risk groups each year
- Because of genetic changes, new vaccines are needed each year
- Strains are identified by the number of Haemagglutinin (H), and neuraminidase (N) proteins
- H5N1 avian influenza has killed about 250 people since 2003

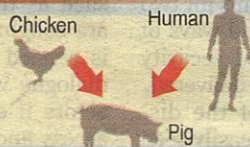
How a flu virus spreads



Source: WHO/CDC

Swine flu

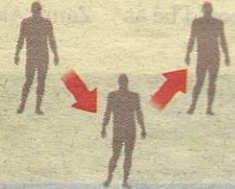
Pigs can host viruses from both humans and birds



This can create a mix of genes and a new viral strain that jumps back over the species barrier



It becomes most dangerous if it can pass from human to human easily



The latest threat is a new strain of the H1N1 type of flu virus

Pandemics in the 20th century

1918	"Spanish flu" - killed up to 40 million	1957	"Asian influenza" - up to four million deaths	1968	"Hong kong flu" - up to one million deaths
------	-----------------------------------------	------	-----------------------------------------------	------	--------------------------------------------

280409 AFP

not in the US swine herd," said Dave Warner, of the National Pork Producers Council. "I think the economics right now is being driven by fear of what could happen, rather than what really is happening."

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack even pushed to change the name of swine flu to protect the hog market.

The danger of economic fallout helps explain the cautious stance of the World Health Organisation, which has not recommended travel restrictions as it has in previous outbreaks.

WHO, is a health agency, but its policies are driven at least partly by financial considerations. In recent years, the agency has shied away from actions that might upset member nations.

Dr Margaret Chan, the agency's head, has repeatedly said that her priority is to serve her countries.

That is in direct contrast to the strong action WHO took to contain SARS in 2003, when it issued travel advisories that recommended postponing non-essential travel to cities including Hong Kong, Beijing and Toronto. — AP