

# US expects hike in cases

Tally now stands at 226. Virus spreads to 30 States. More schools closed.

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**NOT TAKING CHANCES:** A South Korean health official checks the temperature of a foreign Buddhist monk upon arrival at Incheon International Airport, west of Seoul yesterday. South Korea reported a new probable case of swine flu yesterday, one day after confirming its first case in a 51-year-old nun who had returned from Mexico. — AFPpic

NEW YORK: The government's tally of confirmed swine flu cases in the United States jumped to 226 in 30 States yesterday. But officials said that's largely from catching up on a backlog of lab tests rather than a sudden spurt in new infections.

The new number, up from 160 on Saturday, reflects streamlining in Federal procedures and the results of tests by States, which have only recently begun confirming cases, said Dr Anne Schuchat of the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta.

"Because States are now contributing their results, and because there are many cases to analyse, I expect the numbers to jump quite a bit in the next couple of days," she told reporters yesterday.

"Virtually all of the US has this virus circulat-

ing now. That doesn't mean that everybody's infected. But within the communities, the virus has arrived."

Mexico's health secretary had said that his country's outbreak is now in its declining phase, but Schuchat noted that the US got off to a later start. "We believe we are just in the upswing here," she said.

Scientists are still gathering information on how severe the nation's 30 hospitalised cases are, she said. They are mostly older children and young adults, in contrast to ordinary flu which tends to send the elderly and the very young to the hospital, Schuchat said.

The only swine flu death in the US is that of a Mexican toddler who was visiting Texas.

Local authorities announced more school closings, including all 24

schools in a district west of Detroit after a high school student came down with an apparent case of the illness.

On yesterday's talk shows, US health officials said they were cautiously optimistic that the swine flu isn't as dangerous as first feared, but urged people to keep taking commonsense precautions.

"The good news is when we look at this virus right now, we're not seeing some of the things in the virus that have been associated in the past with more severe flu. That's encouraging," said Dr Richard Besser, acting CDC chief.

With swine flu, or the H1N1 flu as the government prefers to call it, authorities say it's spreading just as easily as regular winter flu. But they also say it doesn't seem to cause as severe a disease

as it did in Mexico.

A big concern is whether the virus will return, perhaps harder, when regular influenza begins its march here. Flu season in the Southern Hemisphere is about to begin, and US authorities will watch how the swine flu circulates there over the coming months as they prepare the first vaccine and then decide whether to order large amounts of it to be produced in the fall.

Production of regular winter flu vaccine is going full-tilt, said US Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius.

"We are testing the virus strain for H1N1 virus so that we're ready to go into production in a month or two, when we make sure that we have the right dosage and the right tests. So we'll be ready for both," she said.

Even if the swine virus doesn't prove as potent

as authorities first feared, Besser said that doesn't mean the US and World Health Organisation overreacted in racing to prevent a pandemic, or worldwide spread, of a virus never before seen.

With a new infectious disease, "you basically get one chance to try to reduce the impact," Besser said. "You take a very aggressive approach and as you learn you can tailor your response."

It was just over a week ago that authorities learned the new flu CDC had detected in a few people in California and Texas was causing a large outbreak and deaths in Mexico, triggering a global alarm.

"We didn't know what its lethality was going to be. We had to move. Once you get behind flu, you can't catch up," Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano said. — AP