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World on brink of

H1N1 pandemic



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GENEVA: The World Health Organisation is gearing up to declare an H1N1 pandemic, a move that could trigger both the large-scale production of vaccines and questions about why the step was delayed for weeks as the virus continued to spread.

Yesterday, WHO chief Dr Margaret Chan quizzed eight countries with large H1N1 flu outbreaks to see if a pandemic, or global epidemic, should be declared. After Chan's teleconference, the agency announced that an emergency meeting with its flu experts would be held today.

Since H1N1 flu first emerged in Mexico and the United States in

April, it has spread to 74 countries around the globe. Yesterday, WHO reported 27,737 cases including 141 deaths. Most cases are mild and require no treatment.

The world is in phase 5 of WHO's pandemic alert scale, meaning a global outbreak is imminent. Moving to phase 6, the highest level, means a pandemic has begun. If that declaration is made, it will push drugmakers to fast-track production of a vaccine.

Chan says she personally believes that a pandemic is under way, but was seeking clear proof that the flu was spreading rapidly from person to person outside the Americas before declaring a global epidemic.

"Once I get indisputable evidence, I will make the announcement," she told reporters on Tuesday.

It would be the first flu pandemic in 41 years, since the Hong Kong flu of 1968.

If a global outbreak is announced, countries would likely activate their own pandemic preparedness plans if they haven't already. That could mean devoting more money to health services or imposing measures like quarantines, school closures, travel bans and trade restrictions — some of which WHO opposes.

WHO said announcing a pandemic would not mean the situation

was worsening, since no mutations have been detected in the virus to show it is getting more deadly.

Many experts said WHO's delayed decision has cost the agency credibility.

One flu expert said WHO's pandemic declaration would mean little in terms of how countries are responding to the outbreak.

"The writing has been on the wall for weeks," said Chris Smith, a flu virologist at Cambridge University, adding he didn't know why WHO had waited so long to declare a pandemic.

"WHO probably doesn't want people to panic, but the virus is now unstoppable." — AP

World 'very close' to H1N1 pandemic

A spike in the number of H1N1 influenza cases in Australia may push the World Health Organisation to declare a Phase 6 pandemic – indicating the virus has become established outside its North American area of origin

Confirmed cases of influenza A(H1N1)

Canada

2,446 **4**

US

13,217 **27**

Mexico

5,717 **106**

Costa Rica **1**

Panama: 221

Chile: 1694 **2**

Argentina: 235

UK

675

Dominican
Rep. **1**

Spain
331.

Australia
1,224

Japan
485

China
142



June 9: 27,737 cases confirmed to WHO by 75 countries, including 141 deaths