

WHO: Mexico swine flu has 'pandemic potential'

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GENEVA – An outbreak of swine flu in Mexico and the United States is a quickly evolving situation that has "pandemic potential," the head of the World Health Organization said Saturday before an emergency meeting of flu experts.

WHO Director-General Margaret Chan said the North American outbreak of a never-before-seen virus was a very serious situation.

She called Saturday's emergency meeting to consider declaring an international public health emergency over the outbreak, which is believed to have killed dozens of people in Mexico and sickened at least eight in the U.S.

The experts are also expected to recommend whether WHO should raise its pandemic alert to a higher level.

At least 62 people have died from severe pneumonia caused by a flu-like illness in Mexico, according to WHO. Some of those who died are confirmed to have a unique version of the A/H1N1 flu virus that is a combination of bird, pig and human viruses.

Mexico has closed schools, museums, libraries and theaters in a bid to contain the outbreak, which may have sickened about 1,000 people there.

"The situation is evolving quickly," Chan said at a telephone news conference in Geneva. "A new disease is by definition poorly understood.

"In the assessment of WHO, this is a serious situation which must be watched very closely."

"This is an animal strain of the H1N1 virus, and it has pandemic potential because it is infecting people," Chan said.

"However, we cannot say, on the basis of currently available laboratory, epidemiological and clinical evidence, whether or not it will indeed cause a pandemic," she added.

It is the first time Chan has convened such a crisis panel since the procedure was created almost two years ago, spokesman Gregory Hartl said.

The committee may decide Saturday that the outbreak constitutes a public health emergency, and if so, whether WHO should consider measures including travel advisories, trade restrictions and border closures.

The global body's flu pandemic alert level is now set to phase three — meaning there is no or very limited risk of a new virus spreading from human to human.

The committee "will be asked, 'should we raise the alert level to phase four or phase five,' depending on their appreciation of how far the virus has spread," Hartl said.

An increased alert level was considered likely, as initial evidence from the outbreak in Mexico indicates the virus has spread between people. Hartl said, however, that a decision would not be made Saturday.

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