

WHO consults emergency flu committee

June 5 2009

GENEVA (AFP) — The World Health Organisation on Friday began consulting its emergency committee of flu experts on the severity of the swine flu virus and possible travel recommendations.

However, the UN health agency was not expecting to make a decision on whether to declare a fully-fledged swine flu pandemic Friday, a WHO spokeswoman said, even though the body of scientists could recommend that it did so.

The agenda of the meeting was to discuss the "severity of H1N1 and also to review international health-related measures," WHO spokeswoman Fadela Chaib said.

She later told AFP: "There is no decision to expect to move to phase six today," referring to the six-level pandemic alert scale.

The alert is now at phase five, which signals that a pandemic is "imminent."

Gregory Hartl, a WHO spokesman added that travel recommendations would be discussed by the emergency committee.

The experts would also be asked to give their opinion on "adding a characterization of severity" to the alert scale.

A senior WHO official had said Tuesday that the world was "getting closer" to a swine flu pandemic as the virus shows early signs of spreading locally in countries outside the Americas.

"Globally we believe that we are at phase five but are getting closer to phase six," Keiji Fukuda, WHO assistant director-general, said then.

He cited Australia, Britain, Japan, Spain and Chile in particular as countries where the flu was showing early signs of local spread.

Australia's swine flu tally jumped by more than a third to nearly 900 on Thursday.

Some 69 countries around the world have reported 21,940 cases to the WHO, according to latest figures on the WHO website.

Under the WHO's guidelines, one key criteria for a move to the highest phase six alert would be established community spread in a country outside the first region in which the disease was initially reported, in this case, outside the Americas.

Other than geographical spread, WHO officials said last month that they were also looking at the severity of the virus, possible changes in the pattern of illness, its impact on poor countries or circulation in the southern hemisphere where it could mix with seasonal flu.

Fukuda said Tuesday that the swine flu situation could be described as "moderate" rather than "mild".

This is because "we do not have a full handle on the number of people with serious illnesses," he added.

<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jqFJwI54rEqJRzuGI86GSMQeGZAA>