

Panic in Ukraine over swine flu

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Officials in Ukraine have closed schools for three weeks, imposed travel restrictions and are limiting public events as the country battles to stop the spread of swine flu.

More than 60 people are believed to have died of respiratory problems in the past week, and the measures are among the toughest to be implemented in Europe to tackle the virus.

It's still not clear whether all the deaths were caused by swine flu, but the news has sparked panic, and people have started wearing masks across the country.

Appeal for calm

The Ukrainian health minister Vasyl Knyazevych has asked the media only to report the comments of medical experts following a series of misleading reports which fuelled public anxiety.

On national television, he said Ukraine had the same problems as the rest of the world.

He also called on fellow politicians to give people 'a week of silence,' and said there was no need for panic.

However, his calls may already be too late.

255,000 cases of flu and acute respiratory problems have been registered among the 46m population. 15,000 have been hospitalised.

The World Health Organisation says there is no evidence to suggest that Ukraine had a bad outbreak of swine flu, but it has agreed to send a team there to help the country cope.

President Viktor Yushchenko has also appealed for international help.

Government response

The government has faced growing criticism of its handling of the outbreak.

Some opposition politicians have been particularly critical of the health minister who they not only want to be sacked, but jailed.

Opposition politicians from the Party of the Regions say the first reported cases were at the beginning of October, but by middle of the month there had already been confirmed deaths.

They say the authorities should have provided accurate information about the outbreak so that Ukrainians could seek appropriate medical help.

Instead, the opposition says, many people have resorted to self-treatment.

Experts say Ukraine was unprepared for the swine flu outbreak, and the hunt for political scapegoats is likely to continue.

The opposition leader, Viktor Yanukovich, has called on parliament to scrutinise the government's actions.

Investigation calls

The influential National Security and Defence Council has called on the judiciary to investigate why Ukraine was unable to prevent the outbreak.

President Viktor Yushchenko has even asked the country's security service to look at whether pharmacies are guilty of price-fixing anti-flu medications.

“ The world has given us the financial crisis and now this horrible flu ”

Yulia Tymoshenko Ukrainian Prime Minister

Critics have also rounded on Ukrainian television channels which they say have wall-to-wall coverage of Ukraine's leading politicians, but not leading medical specialists.

This, they say, is exacerbating public concern rather than allaying popular fears.

Some analysts say swine flu is being used by the President and his arch rival the Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko to score political points ahead of presidential elections in January.

Supporters of Prime Minister Tymoshenko, who remains at bitter loggerheads with the President, say he is trying to blame her government for the situation.

Playing politics

Aware of the electoral sensitivities, she assured the Ukrainian public that she stood with them, and took "every responsibility for the government's handling of swine flu on herself."

"The world has given us not one, but two great trials - first, the financial crisis and now this horrible flu."

Ukraine's leading political analysts say the handling of swine flu has become one of the key electoral issues.

“ The main players are using the flu in their propaganda war ”

Vitaly Kulk

According to them, rival candidates are seeking to take the initiative in battling the spread of the virus.

"The swine flu outbreak has overshadowed all the other negative campaigning we were seeing, especially around Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko," says Vitaly Kulyk, a political scientist at Kiev's Centre for Civil Society.

"The main players are using the flu in their propaganda war," he adds.

Appeals for help

Opposition leader Viktor Yanukovich, whose party is backed by Ukraine's most powerful oligarch, has called on Ukrainians to donate to a special fund which was set up by his party.

He said he wanted to hold a TV marathon to raise funds to fight the epidemic.

The first aircraft to arrive in Ukraine from Switzerland carrying emergency medical supplies, was met by the country's leadership.

They demonstrated how to put face masks on in front of cameras.

Many Ukrainians however, are asking why their government did not act sooner.

It was evident in May or June that swine flu was spreading around the world, they say, yet Ukraine failed to stockpile sufficient supplies of medication.

Only now, when Ukraine faces an epidemic of swine flu, has the government started to act.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8338835.stm>