

Countries respond to higher flu alert

by UPI

GENEVA, Switzerland -- At least 148 confirmed cases of swine flu worldwide have been reported and the World Health Organization, based in Geneva, raised the alert level.

WHO Director General Dr. Margaret Chan said she was raising the influenza pandemic alert from phase 4 to phase 5 based on available information and consultations with experts. The scale goes up to 6.

"This change to a higher phase of alert is a signal to governments, to ministries of health and other ministries, to the pharmaceutical industry and the business community that certain actions should now be undertaken with increased urgency, and at an accelerated pace," Chan said in a statement late Wednesday. "On the positive side, the world is better prepared for an influenza pandemic than at any time in history."

Countries have reported laboratory confirmed cases with no deaths include Austria, one; Canada, 13; Germany, three; Israel, two; New Zealand, three; Spain, four; and Britain, five.

The United States reported 91 confirmed cases of swine flu with one death -- a Mexican child taken to Houston for treatment. Health officials in Mexico, believed to be ground zero for the outbreak, blame swine flu for more than 150 deaths and more than 2,000 illnesses.

Worldwide, countries are stepping up efforts to combat the spread of swine flu, now spanning four continents.

Health officials in Asia responded to the WHO's new alert level by activating pandemic plans, tightening border and port surveillance and stockpiling anti-flu drugs, Voice of America reported Thursday. Hong Kong, the Philippines and Australia activated swine flu hot lines Thursday and urged the public to maintain good hygiene.

Mexican officials braced for a national shutdown of gathering places such as schools, offices, restaurants and museums to slow the spread of the disease, The New York Times reported Thursday.

In a nationally televised speech Wednesday, Mexican President Felipe Calderon said many public service facilities would be closed Friday through Tuesday.

In Europe, health officials prepared for emergency talks Thursday in Luxembourg to fashion their own response.

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