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Jack Straw took part in talks in Luxembourg yesterday.
Picture: Bruno Vincent/Getty Images

Drug production to be stepped up

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EUROPEAN Union ministers yesterday conceded the region was ill-prepared for a flu pandemic after it emerged that fewer than half of its 25 member nations had the recommended level of anti-viral drugs ready.

The admission followed a high-level meeting in Luxembourg at which the EU declared the spread of bird flu from Asia into the EU was a "global threat" requiring international co-operation.

Markos Kyprianou, EU health commissioner, said: "Anti-virals are the first line of defence, and vaccines are the second. We have to step up our manufacturing capacity. We have not reached the level of preparedness we should have."

The news came as Macedonia became the latest country to find evidence of the disease, a day after the first suspected case in the EU was uncovered in Greece.

Tests are also being carried out on birds found in Croatia and Bulgaria after the deadly H5N1 virus was found in Turkey and Romania earlier this week.

So far the virus has only killed 60 humans, all of whom came into close contact with poultry. But if it mutates to spread between humans, it could spark a global pandemic, killing millions worldwide including, some estimates claim, up to 50,000 Scots.



The World Health Organisation has recommended that governments stockpile enough anti-viral drugs to treat 25 per cent of their population.

But the 25 member states, as well as Iceland, Norway and Liechtenstein, have only 10 million doses now for an area of almost 500 million people and will have only 46 million doses by the end of 2007.

The UK government is urgently stockpiling the anti-viral drug Tamiflu at the rate of 800,000 courses per month. Scotland is eventually to get 1.2 million courses.

The increasing demand for Tamiflu has brought pressure on Swiss drugmaker Roche - which holds the patent to the drug - to grant a licence to other firms. Indian drugs firm Cipla is already seeking a licence. The Swiss company is also building a new plant in the United States to boost production.

EU ministers underlined the seriousness of bird flu and the threat it poses to animal and public health, describing it as "a global threat".

Mr Kyprianou said: "We cannot protect ourselves alone. There is need for international action and international solidarity with countries in Asia."

The H5N1 virus first appeared in Asia where it led to the deaths of tens of millions of birds. The westward spread of the virus is caused by the migration of birds.

The first case on mainland Europe was found in Turkey but the risks to Britain have moved closer with suspected cases in Greece, Bulgaria and Croatia, and then Macedonia yesterday.

Samples from a suspect chicken on a farm in southern Macedonia have been sent to a laboratory in England. The authorities have quarantined the Macedonian village and set up a square-mile exclusion zone. They now plan to cull 10,000 chickens.

Most of the birds migrating to Scotland at this time of the year come from the north but there is a chance individual birds may pass through infected areas on their way to Scotland.

Tests are being carried out on ducks, geese and swans at Caerlaverock nature reserve on the Solway Firth. Birdwatchers have been urged to be alert for signs that avian flu has reached British shores.

Julian Hughes, head of species conservation at the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, told the BBC: "Birds that are likely to show evidence of avian flu are going to be wildfowl - ducks and geese in the main.

"When people are out bird-watching in the countryside, if they do see anything out of the ordinary - a die-off of 20, 30 or 40 birds - that's the cue that something has gone wrong, and there is a government helpline that you can ring to report the incident."

However, Zsuzsanna Jakab, of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, said the risk to human and animal health was "minimal" at this stage.

And Jack Straw, the Foreign Secretary, said the EU was well equipped to cope "swiftly and

efficiently" in a pandemic.

"We want to reassure people across Europe about this - we are working together as closely as we can," he said.

Customs officials across the UK were on heightened alert yesterday for imports from any of the infected countries. Dog handlers were being asked to check parcels and baggage for imported birds - dead or alive - as well as eggs and feathers.

Patricia Hewitt, the Health Secretary, said the UK would continue to review its preparations, "so that as far as any country can be fully prepared against the risk of pandemic flu, we in the UK will be prepared".

But Patrick Mercer, Conservative homeland security spokesman, said that a single minister should be appointed to take responsibility for dealing with the threat of avian flu.

He warned that if the warning signs were not heeded, Europe could see a repeat of the 1918 flu pandemic, which killed up to 50 million people worldwide.

Mr Mercer told the BBC: "I'm not saying that is going to happen, but there are very dangerous signs."

Web links

- [Dept of Health - pandemic flu](http://www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/EmergencyPlanning/PandemicFlu/fs/en)
<http://www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/EmergencyPlanning/PandemicFlu/fs/en>
- [WHO - Bird Flu fact sheet](http://www.who.int/csr/don/2004_01_15/en/)
http://www.who.int/csr/don/2004_01_15/en/

Related topic

- [Bird flu](http://news.scotsman.com/topics.cfm?tid=161)
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