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'Inevitable' bird flu outbreak could cost world up to \$800bn

ALEXANDER G HIGGINS IN GENEVA

A DEADLY new global pandemic of human influenza is all but inevitable and suffering will be "incalculable" unless the world is ready, the chief of the UN health agency said yesterday, while the World Bank put the possible economic cost at \$800 billion (£458 billion).

"We have been experiencing a relentless spread of avian flu among migratory birds and domestic poultry," Lee Jong-wook, the director-general of the World Health Organisation, told a meeting of 600 health experts and planners, in the first attempt to devise a global strategy to prepare for the possibility that bird flu could mutate and spread between humans.

Mr Lee observed that a human flu pandemic has yet to begin anywhere in the world.

"However, the signs are clear that it is coming," he said, noting that a changed avian flu virus caused the deadly "Spanish" flu pandemic that killed tens of millions of people between 1918 and 1919.

The virulent H5N1 strain of avian flu, which appeared in Hong Kong in 1997, has killed birds in 15 countries in Europe and Asia, he said.

"It is only a matter of time before an avian flu virus - most likely H5N1 - acquires the ability to be transmitted from human to human, sparking the outbreak of human pandemic influenza," Mr Lee said.

He added that the world had to be prepared.

"This is the time for every country to prepare their national action plan - and act on it," Mr Lee said. "If we are unprepared, the next pandemic will cause incalculable human misery - both directly from the loss of human life and indirectly through its widespread impact on security. No society will be exempt. No economy would be left unscathed."

Estimates of the number of people who would die in a pandemic have varied widely between two million and 360 million, but the WHO says a reasonable maximum would be about 7.4 million fatalities.

And a senior World Bank economist said a pandemic could cause world gross domestic product to drop by 2 per cent or more. That would amount to about \$800 billion over the course of a year, said Milan Brahmbhatt.

About 60 per cent of countries have a pandemic preparedness plan, but in most cases it is only a piece of paper, and those plans "need to move to exercise and rehearsal," said Mike Ryan, WHO's outbreak response director.



Although bird flu has recurred over the years, scientists have been particularly watching H5N1 since its impact on humans started to be noticed. In early 2004 officials announced that three people - an adult and two children - had died from the disease in Vietnam.

Since then, more than 120 people, most of whom were in close contact with poultry, have come down with the disease in Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Indonesia, the WHO says. So far 62 of them have died.

More than 150 million chickens and other poultry have died or been culled, but that has not halted the spread of the disease to birds in central Asia, Russia and eastern Europe.

Developing a human vaccine is not possible, as it is unknown what form a virus would take.

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/)
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