

THE SCOTSMAN

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Prepare for panic when UK is hit by bird flu pandemic

GORDON FARQUHAR

SOLDIERS will keep order on the streets if bird flu decimates police numbers and causes widespread panic, a senior officer has revealed.

Temporary mortuaries are being planned to deal with the dead if a pandemic strikes.

Buses will be drafted in to help over-stretched ambulance services ferry patients around.

Meanwhile, the police will ask for emergency powers to cancel football matches, pop concerts and other such major gatherings.

Sir Liam Donaldson, the chief medical officer, has warned it is not a case of if, but when Britain is hit by the virus that has killed dozens of people in Asia.

Police will guard doctors' surgeries and NHS clinics to stop panicking crowds from trying to get their hands on antiviral drugs under contingency plans drawn up by Britain's biggest force.

However, as many as four in ten officers could be laid up by the virus, the senior officer charged with overseeing the police response told a parliamentary inquiry.

The military will be the "first port of call" to make up the numbers, said Alan Goodwin, who chairs the Association of Chief Police Officers' emergency procedures committee.

Soldiers could also find themselves facing angry mobs as well as carrying out routine police tasks, Mr Goodwin said.

"Rioting is a very emotive term but it is more born out of panic if there are antiviral drugs and the rumour is that there is only enough for 2,000 and there are 10,000 in the town," he said.

"You always have to be prepared for the eventuality that a public order situation arises, if people fuelled by panic are laying siege to doctors surgeries."

Mr Goodwin was speaking after giving evidence to the Lords' science and technology committee inquiry into Britain's preparedness for a mass outbreak.

A pandemic would place serious strains on under-strength resources, he told peers. Officers will be needed to protect vaccine stocks and centres while others will be tied up in coroners' courts if many people die.



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Even with military help stricken forces would be forced to drop low priorities such as dealing with nuisance neighbours, he said.

The public will be encouraged not to dial 999 unless it is absolutely necessary.

Mr Goodwin also questioned "the wisdom" of allowing tens of thousands of people to attend football matches and other gatherings.

"You get 67,000 people gathered at Old Trafford for a football match from all over the country," he said.

"We may need powers to go to Manchester United and to say we don't want 67,000 gathering there on a Saturday afternoon."

Senior officers will go to the government's emergency Cobra committee and ask for those powers if the situation arises, he added.

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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