

Evening News

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World faces 'deadly bird flu pandemic'

THE world is "perilously close" to a deadly bird flu pandemic, a top international health official warned today.

Dr Shigeru Omi, the World Health Organisation's Western Pacific regional director, told the opening of a three-day conference on bird flu that health agencies around the world urgently needed to better co-ordinate their fight against the virus.

"We at the WHO believe that the world is now in the gravest possible danger of a pandemic," he said.

"If the virus becomes highly contagious among humans, the health impact in terms of deaths and sickness will be enormous, and certainly much greater than Sars.

"This is why we are urging all governments to work now on a pandemic preparedness plan, so that even in an emergency such as this they will be able to provide basic public services such as transport, sanitation and power."

The conference is focused on long-term strategies for eradicating the virus, which devastated south-east Asia's poultry industry last year as it swept through nearly a dozen countries.

The disease has killed 45 people - 32 Vietnamese, 12 Thais and one Cambodian - in cases largely traced to contact with sick birds.

Experts have repeatedly warned that the H5N1 bird flu virus could become far deadlier still if it mutates into a form that can be easily transmitted between humans, sparking a global pandemic that could kill millions.

Scientists and representatives from more than two dozen countries met in southern Ho Chi Minh City, near the Mekong Delta where the latest outbreaks emerged this year.

Animal health officials said there was still time to stop the disease from developing into a pandemic, by controlling transmission at source.

"This means addressing the transmission of the virus where the disease occurs, in poultry, specifically free-range chickens and wetland dwelling ducks," said Dr Samuel Jutzi, of the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organisation.

Still, many countries affected by the virus lack effective diagnostic tools and surveillance systems needed for early warning and timely response, he said.

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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