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WHO head indicates full flu pandemic to be declared

by **Ben Harding & Laura MacInnis**

MADRID/GENEVA: The World Health Organisation (WHO) is likely to raise its flu alert to the top of its six-point scale and declare a pandemic, its director-general indicated in an interview published yesterday.

In remarks setting the scene for another alert increase, but without saying when, WHO chief Margaret Chan warned against over-confidence following a stabilisation in the number of new cases of the H1N1 strain that has proved deadly in Mexico.

"Level 6 does not mean, in any way, that we are facing the end of the world. It is important to make this clear — because (otherwise) when we announce level 6, it will cause an unnecessary panic," she told Spanish newspaper *El Pais*.

"Flu viruses are very unpredictable, very deceptive. We should not be over-confident. One must not give H1N1 the opportunity to mix with other viruses. That is why we are on alert."

The WHO's pandemic phases reflect views about how a virus is spreading, and not how severe its effects are.

Last week, the United Nations (UN) agency raised the alert level



Workers package flocked specimen swabs and transport medium materials for distribution to physicians and urgent care locations for testing of viruses in Athens, Ohio. Before issuing a level 6 alert, the WHO would need to see the virus spreading within communities in Europe or Asia. Photo by Bloomberg

twice, from 3 to the current 5, in response to the sustained transmission of H1N1 in Mexico and the United States.

Before issuing a level 6 alert, the WHO would need to see the virus spreading within communities in Europe or Asia.

A declaration of a full pandemic would send a signal to governments worldwide to institute their pandemic response plans, which may include measures affecting hospitals, schools or public events.

Phase 6 would also trigger increased support for developing countries which lack the drugs, diagnostic tests, and medical staff to respond appropriately to the flu that the WHO has said could be especially dangerous for people with HIV/AIDS.

While the top-level alert would not have an automatic effect on the world's flu vaccine production, the WHO is expected to make an announcement alongside any such declaration to specify whether manufacturers should switch from making seasonal to pandemic flu vaccines.

In her remarks to *El Pais*, Chan said that weather patterns could play an important role in how the flu continues to spread. The southern hemisphere is about to enter winter, when seasonal flu cases normally spike, the infectious disease expert said.

"We have to be very careful. No one can predict what is going to happen when countries in the south have flu peaks and this new one arrives — which it is going to do, without a doubt," she said. — *Reuters*