

Headline	WHO may raise flu alert to level 6	Language	ENGLISH
Date	05. May 2009	Page No	1
Media Title	The Sun	Article Size	155 cm2
Section	National	Frequency	Daily
Circulation	174179	Color	Full Color
Readership	171000	AdValue	2771.07



WHO may raise flu alert to **level 6**

MADRID: The World Health Organisation 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

agency raised the alert level 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.

Level 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.

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, she 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

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