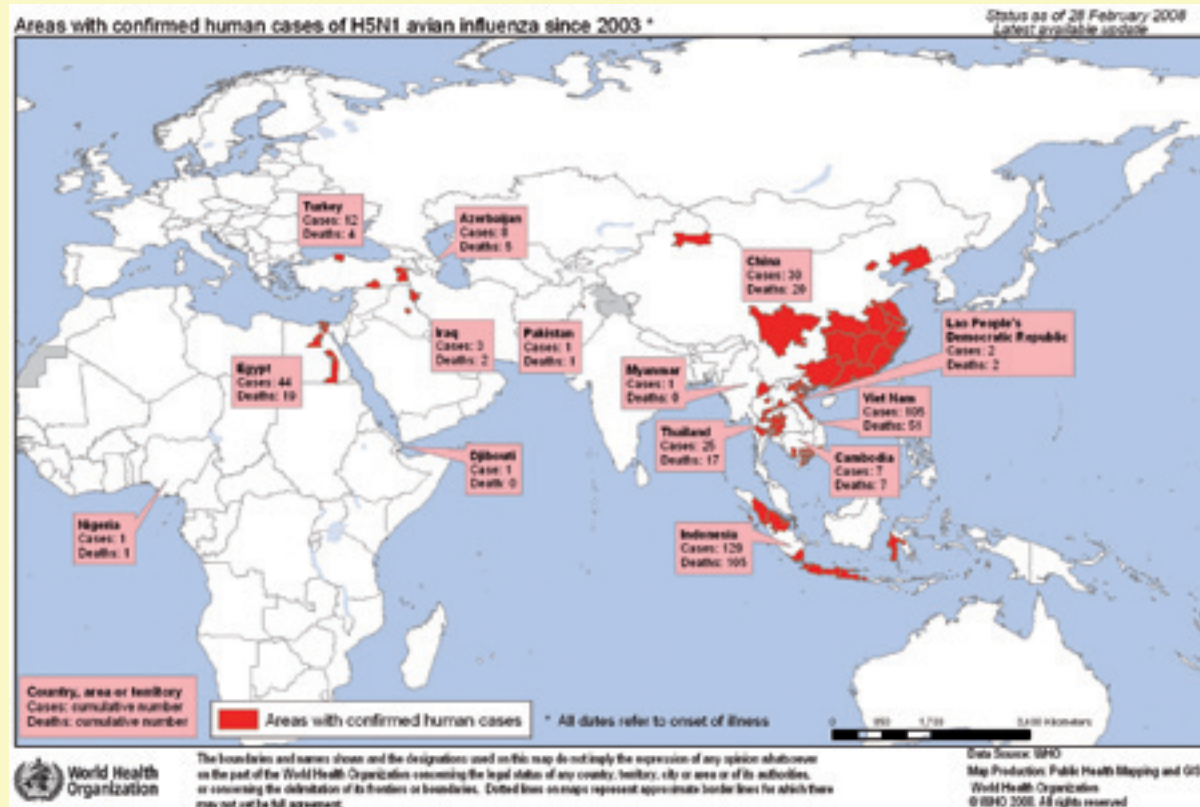


CURRENT SITUATION OF BIRD FLU (AVIAN INFLUENZA) IN THE WORLD AND IN THE PACIFIC



What could happen in the Pacific if a new pandemic comes?

The World Health Organization has estimated that even a mild pandemic would cause more than 7 million deaths worldwide. The World Bank has also estimated \$800 billion in global economic damage. In the event of a pandemic, affected countries will experience the direct impact of illness and death caused by the spread of the virus, on top of the severe economic damage.

Vital public services, including medical services, may be overwhelmed by large numbers of patients flocking to hospitals for treatment. Doctors and nurses will get infected themselves and may therefore not be able to provide the services required.

Social activities are likely to come to a halt because people will avoid face-to-face interaction for fear of catching the disease. Schools, churches and other public gathering places may be closed as a means of reducing the risk of transmission. This could result in social disruption and possibly even panic.

If a pandemic occurs, many people may have no or limited immunity to the new virus. While some clinical trials are currently underway to test experimental vaccines, no vaccines are expected to be widely available until several months after the start of a pandemic. Experts forecast that the impact of a flu pandemic would be greater in developing countries due to greater population density and limited surge capacity of health care services.

What is being done in the Pacific in response to pandemic flu threat?

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Pacific, in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), are actively involved in a major initiative to assist the governments of the Pacific Island countries to prepare communication strategies and plans to mitigate the possible impact of bird flu and/or a flu pandemic. The project is aligned with the Pacific Regional Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Project (PRIPPP), managed by SPC, which is assisting governments of Pacific Island countries to prepare national avian influenza and pandemic influenza preparedness and response plans. SPC and Pacific Island countries are also working with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).



The H5N1 strain of bird flu virus was first identified in 1997. The current outbreak started in 2003 in South-East Asia and has spread widely, particularly among poultry and wild birds all around Asia, the Middle East, Europe and Africa.

The current outbreaks of the bird flu virus — H5N1 — are the largest and most severe on record. According to the World Health Organization, as of 28 February 2008, 369 human cases of bird flu, including 234 deaths, have been confirmed globally since 2003.

There is a growing concern around the possibility that the "bird flu" virus may change into a virus that will spread among humans as easily as

normal "flu". If this happens, it could have devastating consequences as people have no immunity to fight it and there will be no immediate vaccine available to combat the rapid spread of the disease.

Why should you as a Pacific Islander be concerned about bird flu?

Flu outbreaks in the Pacific are not new. In 1918, a serious flu outbreak known as the Spanish flu swept across the region. It was caused by a bird virus. During the Spanish flu outbreak, approximately 50 million people were killed worldwide.

The impact in the Pacific was particularly devastating with approximately 5% of the total population in affected islands wiped out.

One of the worst episodes of the pandemic occurred in Samoa, with 22% of its population losing their lives within a matter of weeks. American Samoa had no casualties because the government enforced a total border closure that did not allow movement of people and animals into the country during the pandemic. Mass graveyards of the Spanish flu victims are still present in several countries, including Fiji, as a reminder of the severity of its impact.

While the Spanish flu of 1918 was particularly severe, milder pandemics have also occurred, in 1957 and 1968. According to experts, another global flu outbreak may happen at any time and a "bird flu" virus might trigger it.

If a new pandemic occurs, it is likely that it will not be limited to a single geographical area and the Pacific will be no exception.

What is the likelihood of bird flu arriving into the Pacific?

Like other parts of the world, the Pacific is at risk of bird flu. The risk of the virus spilling over to the Pacific may even be higher because of its close proximity to Asia, where millions of poultry have been infected and culled and more than 200 people have died of the infection.

The virus is mostly spread through infected migratory wild birds and through the importation of infected live poultry and poultry products. Once the infection in birds spreads, the chances of animal to human transmission become more probable. If human-to-human transmission occurs this could further generate into a pandemic through the significant movement of people within the Pacific region and from other parts of the world.

Although no cases of bird flu have been found or reported in the Pacific, the probability of the virus spreading to our region cannot be ruled out. The best way to safeguard against this happening is to prevent infection and spread in domestic poultry and non-migratory wild water birds.