

Statement by Dr. Maureen Birmingham
WHO Representative to Thailand
At the press conference by the Ministry of Public Health of Thailand
22 July 2009

Media as a partner: First I would like to thank the media for their presence and interest here. WHO considers the media a critical partner in getting accurate, sound information to protect the public and avoid panic. We are counting on you to help!

Meaning of a pandemic: It's important to emphasize or clarify what is meant by a pandemic because I see media reports that suggest that transmission can or should be stopped in Thailand. WHO has clarified many times already that it is unstoppable. That is the nature of a pandemic – it will spread worldwide. And it may spread in a very patchy way – by surging in one country and dissipating in another, only to surge again at a later date.

Highest priority is on protecting people: So, please help us to get the *priority* messages out on the measures to protect people. You have heard what these measures are many, many times from Thai health authorities. Please help us inform people about how they can reduce their chance of getting ill, about how the virus generally causes mild disease for most people, but for a small fraction of the population which is more at risk - how to avoid getting seriously ill.

Measures to avoid a surge: WHO also recommends measures to avoid an uncontrollable surge of disease that may overwhelm the health infrastructure. Therefore, countries (including Thailand) may decide to implement temporary measures to slow down the transmission – for example by closing schools temporarily. This is not to stop it, but to slow it down – so that the hospitals do not get overwhelmed.

So, the focus now in Thailand and in other countries where it is rapidly spreading is to protect people.

Collaboration over the years: WHO has collaborated with Thailand over a number of years in developing preparedness measures including their surveillance, laboratories, hospital preparedness, anti-viral supplies and vaccine development. So we have a full programme of collaboration over a number of years.

Tracking as part of global public health team: Thailand is also a very active part of the global public health team which is tracking this virus. Thailand has one of the most robust surveillance systems in SE Asia. It can provide high quality and timely information so that we know where the virus is spreading, how it is behaving, how it might be changing, and who is most at risk.

Reporting: Some of you may have questions on why WHO has recently modified their reporting requirement. In those countries where the virus is already spreading throughout the country, there is no longer a public health need to collect and send detailed data on every single case to WHO. This uses up precious resources that should be used to instead to focus the monitoring on priority issues such as how the virus may be changing, and clusters of unusual cases, or specific risk factors in the

population for severe disease. Moreover, it is impossible to count every case because many go unnoticed due to only mild symptoms. Estimates can instead be made more efficiently through modeling the disease. This is ongoing work. So, once community transmission is happening in a country, WHO requests only aggregate data; we collect detailed data on only a small sample of people to keep tabs on the virus. Thailand is correctly following WHO's recommendations to monitor any unusual aspects of the virus, how it may be changing or any specific risk factors for severe disease.

I hope this is clear. If not, please ask me questions and I will try to clarify the best I can.

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Office of the WHO Representative to Thailand
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