



Security Council Topic Background Guide  
***Topic 3: Responding to the Global Influenza Pandemic<sup>1</sup>***

October 7, 2009

Whether challenges such as disease and environmental crises should be considered by the Security Council is an open question, for two reasons. First, the UN Charter does not define security. Second, the Charter gives the Security Council the ability to decide which security issues it will address.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, the Security Council (SC) has interpreted its responsibility for promoting “the establishment and maintenance of international peace and security” to pertain primarily to military matters. It has left issues such as disease to be treated by the General Assembly (GA) and its various subcommittees and specialized agencies, such as the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and World Health Organization (WHO). According to the UN Charter, the GA is responsible for “promoting international co-operation in the economic, social, cultural, educational, and health fields.”<sup>3</sup>

On April 29, 2009, at a Security Council meeting on children and armed conflict, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon explained what the WHO was doing to keep the swine flu (H1N1 influenza virus) from turning into a pandemic and called for Security Council attention to the matter. According to Secretary Ban, “This really requires the whole international community’s cooperation, and I count on the leadership and commitment of not only the Council member States, but the whole international community.”<sup>4</sup>

In June 2009, WHO Director-General Margaret Chan declared the swine flu a pandemic.<sup>5</sup> A pandemic is an epidemic or sudden outbreak of a disease that becomes very widespread, affecting an entire region, a continent, or even the world.<sup>6</sup> According to some estimates, H1N1 could sicken 25 to 30 percent of the world’s population. This would put severe strains on healthcare systems and would weaken economies and security systems through the loss of workers in critical facilities such as electrical plants.<sup>7</sup> Without international assistance, developing countries would be especially unprepared to respond to a pandemic within their borders and keep it from spreading to the rest of the world.

The main concern is that once a virulent virus infects one quarter of a population, even the developed world could not stop it, and the resulting death tolls would be extreme. For example, if a virus infected 25 percent of the

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<sup>1</sup> This document was written by Kedra Hildebrand, Teaching Assistant and Karen Adams, Faculty Advisor.

<sup>2</sup> UN Charter, Chapter IV, Article 12, available at <http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/>

<sup>3</sup> UN Charter, Chapter IV, Article 13 and Chapter V, Article 24.

<sup>4</sup> UN News Centre, “UN notches up swine flu pandemic alert to level 5,” 29 April 2009, available at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=30638>

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Chan, “World now at the start of 2009 influenza pandemic,” 11 June 2009, available at [http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/statements/2009/h1n1\\_pandemic\\_phase6\\_20090611/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/statements/2009/h1n1_pandemic_phase6_20090611/en/index.html)

<sup>6</sup> Medicine Net, “Definition of Pandemic,” 2009, available online at <http://www.medterms.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=4751>

<sup>7</sup> Bryan Walsh, “How to Prepare for a Pandemic,” *Time Magazine*, v. 173 i. 19, (May 18, 2009), available online at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1896728,00.html>

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population and killed two percent of the population, death tolls would be 1.8 million in the United States alone<sup>8</sup> and more than 33 million worldwide.<sup>9</sup> These estimates are relatively conservative. For example, although the H5N1 (avian flu) virus infected only 400 people, it killed more than 60 percent of those infected.<sup>10</sup>

To date, the Security Council has not discussed the H1N1 pandemic. If it did so, it would not be the first time the Security Council considered a “new security” issue such as disease.<sup>11</sup> In 2000, the Security Council passed a resolution asking the UN Secretary-General to take steps to train and provide for the health needs of peacekeeping personnel in relation to HIV/AIDS.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, on April 17, 2007, the SC held its first-ever discussion of an environmental issue, climate change. Reaction to the discussion was mixed, with some states welcoming Security Council concern and calling for resolutions on the matter, and other states arguing that climate change was not a traditional security issue and should continue to be dealt with by the full-membership GA instead of by the limited-membership Council.<sup>13</sup>

World War I killed 13 to 15 million people. Another 65 to 75 million people died in World War II. Still another 41 million people died in all of the international and civil wars and conflicts combined from 1945 to 2000.<sup>14</sup> The effects of a pandemic on populations and governments could be akin to the effects of a major war.

### *The Influenza Virus*

Influenza is a virus that is in a constant state of mutation and evolution. An influenza virus contains only RNA, which is similar to DNA but is a single strand and is responsible for manufacturing proteins. The virus works by infecting healthy cells and using those cells to replicate.

Once a virus has attacked a healthy cell, its chromosomes are copied and enter the bloodstream to attack more cells throughout the body. As the virus replicates, it can change by picking up genetic material in the cell. For example, a virus in a person could pick up human genetic material, while a virus in a chicken or pig could absorb avian or swine RNA.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> US Department of Health and Human Services, “Flu: For Professionals: Community Planning,” <http://pandemicflu.gov/professional/community/>

<sup>9</sup> In July 2009, the world population was 6.79 billion. US Central Intelligence Agency, “World,” *World Factbook*, available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/xx.html>

<sup>10</sup> News Blaze, “Avian and Pandemic Influenza: The Global Response,” November 25, 2008, available at <http://newsblaze.com/story/20081125125123tsop.nb/topstory.html>

<sup>11</sup> Jessica Tuchman Mathews, “Redefining Security,” *Foreign Affairs* 68:2 (Spring 1989), pp. 162-177.

<sup>12</sup> “UN Security Council Resolution 1308, “The Responsibility of the Security Council in the Maintenance of International Peace and Security: HIV/AIDS and International Peace-keeping Operations,” July 17, 2000, available at [http://data.unaids.org/pub/BaseDocument/2000/20000717\\_un\\_sresolution\\_1308\\_en.pdf](http://data.unaids.org/pub/BaseDocument/2000/20000717_un_sresolution_1308_en.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> United Nations Department of Public Information, “Security Council Holds First-Ever Debate on Impact of Climate Change on Peace, Security, Hearing over 50 Speakers,” Security Council 5663rd Meeting, April 17, 2007, available at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2007/sc9000.doc.htm> Associated Press, “UN Attacks Climate Change as Threat to Peace,” April 17, 2007, available at <http://www.globalpolicy.org/soecon/envronmt/climate/2007/0417climatethreat.htm>

<sup>14</sup> Milton Leitenberg, “Deaths in Wars and Conflicts in the 20th Century,” Cornell University Peace Studies Program Occasional Paper #29, 3rd edn, 2006, available at <http://www.cissm.umd.edu/papers/files/deathswarsconflictsjune52006.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> “The Path of a Pandemic,” *Newsweek*, v. 153, i. 19/20, (May 11, 2009).

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A virus virulent enough to cause a pandemic occurs when two different types of flu viruses, “happen to get into an animal cell at the same time, swapping entire chromosomes to create ‘re-assorted’ viruses.”<sup>16</sup> For example, the swine flu (H1N1) virus of 2009 originated in a human, was combined in a pig, then passed back to a human. This explains the ease with which it passes from human to human. By contrast, during the avian flu outbreak of 2003, the H5N1 virus passed from infected birds to humans but did not combine to pass from human to human.<sup>17</sup>

### *Options for Containment and Mitigation*

Once a virulent virus has been identified, containment and mitigation measures are vital. Containment measures focus on limiting the spread of the outbreak to a specific geographical region. Mitigation measures limit the spread of the outbreak within containment barriers, as well as outside of them once the barrier has been breached. If containment fails, mitigation is the only option.

Containment and mitigation measures are similar. The most effective measures are to vaccinate people in the affected region to minimize the number of sick people in the region (mitigation) and to vaccinate people in other regions so the virus will not spread beyond the region (containment). But since viruses are constantly mutating, there is only a slim chance that effective vaccines will be immediately available. After the onset of an outbreak, it usually takes 4-6 months to have an effective vaccine.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, because the companies that currently produce vaccine can produce only about one billion doses of vaccine per year, there would not be enough to protect the entire world’s population.<sup>19</sup>

As a result, non-pharmaceutical strategies for containment and mitigation are essential. Non-controversial measures governments can take include urging people to wash their hands and use masks; encouraging people to work from home and keep children home from school when sick; advising businesses such as theatres, museums, and restaurants to close; canceling sporting and other public events; and closing school systems and public offices.<sup>20</sup> Whether these measures are effective depends on many factors, including the virulence of the virus, the extent to which governments can warn people, and whether people have access to the resources such as masks and clean water they need to comply. In developing countries, neither effective communications nor access to needed resources can be assumed. In all countries, there is the additional question of whether people and organizations will modify their behavior as requested.

To overcome these difficulties, governments could take measures such as issuing and enforcing public health orders and monitoring and quarantining people in infected areas. In addition, states could close their borders and quarantine travelers from the infected area. But these measures are controversial because they may violate

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<sup>16</sup> “The Path of a Pandemic.”

<sup>17</sup> “The Path of a Pandemic.”

<sup>18</sup> Mary Ellen Schneider, “Disease Containment is Paramount in Pandemic Outbreak,” *Family Practice News*, 37:4 (February 15, 2007), p. 18.

<sup>19</sup> “Global Health: Preparing for the Worst,” *Economist*, May 9, 2009, available at [http://www.economist.com/science/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=13609361](http://www.economist.com/science/displaystory.cfm?story_id=13609361)

<sup>20</sup> Schneider, “Disease Containment is Paramount in Pandemic Outbreak.” Donald McNeil, “WHO on the Global Swine Flu Outbreak: Containment is No Longer Feasible,” *New York Times*, April 27, 2009, available online at [http://www.cleveland.com/nation/index.ssf/2009/04/who\\_on\\_flu\\_outbreak\\_containmen.html](http://www.cleveland.com/nation/index.ssf/2009/04/who_on_flu_outbreak_containmen.html)

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human rights such as the right to privacy and freedom of movement.<sup>21</sup> In addition, closing borders would prevent the transfer of goods needed to stem a pandemic.<sup>22</sup>

In 2003, Hong Kong was strongly affected by the avian flu (H5N1). At that time, it implemented a containment plan that consisted largely of killing chickens infected with the virus and quarantining infected individuals. Since then, the city has developed a more robust plan in case the virus recurs. Today “the city has 20 million courses of Tamiflu [H5N1 vaccine] -- three times its population.” In addition, Hong Kong has established procedures for transforming holiday camps on the borders to isolation wards to help the health care system cope with a sudden increase in patients.<sup>23</sup>

### *History and Current Events*

Even the most vigilant containment and mitigation systems will not stop all viruses from reaching pandemic levels. Since 1900, there have been three pandemics. The first occurred in 1918 and is known as the Spanish influenza pandemic. It was catastrophic. Approximately 20 to 40 percent of the world population became sick, and 20 to 50 million people died. “Between September 1918 and April 1919, approximately 675,000 deaths from the flu occurred in the U.S. alone.”<sup>24</sup> The most unusual thing about the Spanish flu was its ability to kill young adults between the ages of 20-50, the group in which the mortality rate from illness has historically been the lowest.

The second pandemic occurred in 1957 and is known as the Asian flu. The Asian flu was first identified in Asia. As in 1918, immunity to the particular strain was rare in people less than 65 years of age. But the Asian flu was quickly identified as a possible pandemic, and health officials were able to stock up on vaccines. The biggest struggle with this pandemic was its resurgence in 1958, in what is known as the “second wave” of infection, where thousands more people were infected. Over all 69,800 Americans and two million people worldwide died in this pandemic.<sup>25</sup>

In 1968, another pandemic was detected in Hong Kong and quickly spread around the world. Approximately one million people died worldwide (33,800 in the US), making it the mildest pandemic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Between 1968 and 2008, there were four more pandemic scares: the swine flu in 1976; the Russian flu in 1977; and the avian flu in 1997 and 2003. None of these escalated into pandemics.<sup>26</sup>

In 2009, the swine flu emerged once again. In June 2009, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a pandemic. It is travelling from human to human, has affected many countries, and is affecting even countries with strong public health systems. According to WHO Director-General Chan, “Spread in several countries can no longer be traced to clearly-defined chains of human-to-human transmission. Further spread is considered inevitable.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Schneider, “Disease Containment is Paramount in Pandemic Outbreak.” The most widely-accepted statement of human rights is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), available at <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

<sup>22</sup> McNeil, “WHO on the Global Swine Flu Outbreak: Containment is No Longer Feasible.”

<sup>23</sup> Walsh, “How to Prepare for a Pandemic.”

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, National Vaccine Program Office, “Pandemics and Pandemic Scares in the 20th Century,” available at <http://www.hhs.gov/nvpo/pandemics/flu3.htm>

<sup>25</sup> U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, National Vaccine Program Office, “Pandemics and Pandemic Scares in the 20th Century.”

<sup>26</sup> U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, National Vaccine Program Office, “Pandemics and Pandemic Scares in the 20th Century.”

<sup>27</sup> Chan, “World now at the start of 2009 influenza pandemic.”

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According to WHO, “As of 27 September 2009, worldwide there have been more than 340,000 laboratory confirmed cases of pandemic influenza H1N1 2009 and over 4,100 deaths.... As many countries have stopped counting individual cases, particularly of milder illness, the case count is significantly lower than the actually number of cases.” Of the deaths, 3,020 have occurred in the Americas. The rest have been spread around the world.

Given the ease of worldwide travel, this pandemic is likely to spread quickly, making both containment and mitigation difficult. In addition, high levels of economic interdependence mean that the swine flu pandemic could have far-reaching economic and political effects. In fact, interdependence may make it more difficult to respond to the pandemic. If the economy in one country comes to a halt as workers become ill, the economies of other countries could be affected, making it difficult to amass the resources needed to stop the pandemic from spreading.<sup>28</sup> This could cause international political tensions as well as domestic political unrest.

### *Previous Committee Work on This Topic*

The World Health Organization (WHO) is a specialized agency in the United Nations system. Created on April 7, 1948, it is the organization responsible for providing “leadership on global health matters, shaping the health research agenda, setting norms and standards, articulating evidence-based policy options, providing technical support to countries and monitoring and assessing health trends.”<sup>29</sup> WHO is administered by the World Health Assembly, which is made up of representatives from WHO’s 193 member states. WHO reports to the UN General Assembly through ECOSOC.<sup>30</sup>

In 2007, WHO strengthened and improved its Global Influenza Surveillance Network and urged countries to share risk assessments and develop vaccines.<sup>31</sup> During the swine flu outbreak of 2009, WHO has posted regular situation updates on its website and has worked with governments and pharmaceutical companies to develop and distribute H1N1 influenza vaccines and alert the public.<sup>32</sup> According to WHO, 28 of the 10,000 virus specimens tested to date have been resistant to the antiviral drug oseltamivir. None have been resistant to the antiviral zanamivir.<sup>33</sup> As of September 24, 2009, “Regulatory authorities have licensed pandemic vaccines in Australia, China and the United States of America, soon to be followed by Japan and several countries in Europe.”<sup>34</sup>

In a UN General Assembly meeting on September 2005, US President George W. Bush announced the creation the International Partnership on Avian and Pandemic Influenza (IPAPI). Bush also asked the US Congress to contribute funds to international health surveillance and containment efforts.<sup>35</sup> As of 2006, 93 states and 20

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<sup>28</sup> Michael Osterholm, “Unprepared for a Pandemic: H1N1 Avian Influenza Virus,” *Foreign Affairs*, 86:2 (March-April 2007).

<sup>29</sup> World Health Organization, “About WHO,” World Health Organization website, available at <http://www.who.int/about/en/>

<sup>30</sup> World Health Organization, “Governance of WHO,” World Health Organization website, available at <http://www.who.int/about/governance/en/index.html> See also the WHO Constitution at [http://www.who.int/governance/eb/who\\_constitution\\_en.pdf](http://www.who.int/governance/eb/who_constitution_en.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> News Blaze, “Avian and Pandemic Influenza: The Global Response.”

<sup>32</sup> World Health Organization, “Pandemic (H1N1) 2009,” available at <http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/en/>

<sup>33</sup> World Health Organization, “Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 - update 68,” WHO Situation Update page, <http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/updates/en/index.html>

<sup>34</sup> World Health Organization, “Pandemic influenza vaccines: current status,” [http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/notes/pandemic\\_influenza\\_vaccines\\_20090924/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/notes/pandemic_influenza_vaccines_20090924/en/index.html)

<sup>35</sup> Osterholm, “Unprepared for a Pandemic: H1N1 Avian Influenza Virus.”

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international organizations had joined IPAPI.<sup>36</sup> IPAPI has met every year since October 2005, to generate contributions for pandemic flu assistance worldwide. Yet by 2007, few governments had devoted significant resources to developing new kinds of influenza vaccines or increasing production capacities.<sup>37</sup>

In 2005 and 2006, ECOSOC held meetings to discuss ways of supporting international efforts to stem the spread of the avian flu. In 2006, the committee agreed to assess the effectiveness of international efforts to improve pandemic response.<sup>38</sup>

In 2007, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs created the Pandemic Influenza Contingency website to give directions to UN employees and others about what to do and where to go when a pandemic occurs. It includes information for countries that have no pandemic response plans. The data for the UN website is taken from existing UN and national plans for preparing for an influenza pandemic.<sup>39</sup>

In July 2009, WHO Director-General Chan told UN member states at the ECOSOC High-Level Segment that the swine flu pandemic would have a “devastating” effect in the developing world. Chan asked, “When will the world finally see what most of us in public health regard as self-evident? It is this. A focus on health as a worthy pursuit for its own sake is the surest route to that moral dimension that is so sadly lacking in international systems of governance. It is the surest route to a value system that puts the welfare of humanity at its heart.”<sup>40</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The swine flu has reached pandemic proportions. Governments and international organizations worldwide are trying to minimize its effects. Should the Security Council take action as well?

In researching your country’s position on this issue, consider the following questions:

- How has your country been affected by the swine flu (H1N1) pandemic?
- How has your country responded thus far? Does it have a pandemic plan? Does it have the resources to respond effectively?
- What more can your country do to contain and mitigate the spread of swine flu, both within its borders and around the world?
- Is the H1N1 pandemic a threat to international peace and security? Why or why not? If so, what can and should be done to reduce the threat?
- What can and should the Security Council do to contain and mitigate the swine flu and prepare for future pandemics?

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<sup>36</sup> Tim Lundeen, “Global Pandemic Partnership Enters Second Year at U.N.” *Feedstuffs*, 78:40 (September 25, 2006), p. 4.

<sup>37</sup> Osterholm, “Unprepared for a Pandemic: H1N1 Avian Influenza Virus.”

<sup>38</sup> UN Economic and Social Council, “ECOSOC 2006: Coordination Segment Second Special Event on Avian Flu,” July 10, 2006, available at <http://www.un.org/docs/ecosoc/meetings/2006/cs2006/06%20CS%20background%202nd%20special%20event%20on%20Avian%20Flu.pdf>

<sup>39</sup> UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), “United Nations Pandemic Influenza Contingency,” 2007-2009, available at [http://www.un-pic.org/pic/web/list\\_of\\_indicators.aspx](http://www.un-pic.org/pic/web/list_of_indicators.aspx)

<sup>40</sup> Margaret Chan, “Focus on health is the key to welfare of humanity,” 6 July 2009, available at [http://www.who.int/dg/speeches/2009/health\\_focus\\_20090706/en/](http://www.who.int/dg/speeches/2009/health_focus_20090706/en/)

*Recommended Reading*

Chan, Margaret. "World now at the start of 2009 influenza pandemic." 11 June 2009. Available at [http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/statements/2009/h1n1\\_pandemic\\_phase6\\_20090611/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/statements/2009/h1n1_pandemic_phase6_20090611/en/index.html)

In this speech, the Director-General of WHO explains why the swine flu is a pandemic, how it is likely to spread, and what effects it will have on populations worldwide.

Lacey, Marc and Antonio Betancourt. "Experience Guides Mexico as Swine Flu Cases Surge." *New York Times*. October 7, 2009. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/08/world/americas/08mexico.html?scp=5&sq=h1n1%20swine%20flu&st=cse>

This article explains the measures authorities in Mexico, where the H1N1 virus first surfaced, have found to be most useful for helping its victims and slowing its spread.

Mathews, Jessica Tuchman. "Redefining Security." *Foreign Affairs* 68:2, Spring 1989, pp. 162-177. Available through Infotrac High School Reference.

In this article, the president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace explains why the environment and disease are national and international security issues.

Osterholm, Michael. "Unprepared for a Pandemic: H1N1 Avian Influenza Virus." *Foreign Affairs*. v. 86, i. 2. (March-April 2007). Available through Infotrac High School Reference.

This article provides an explanation of what is at stake for the world when a pandemic occurs and what options are available to governments to help minimize the destruction.

US Department of Health and Human Services, "Flu: For Professionals: Community Planning," <http://pandemicflu.gov/professional/community/>

This is a good example of a national pandemic plan.

Walsh, Bryan. "How to Prepare for a Pandemic." *Time Magazine*. v. 173 i. 19. (May 18, 2009). Available online at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1896728,00.html>

This article provides a good overview of the risks associated with a pandemic and several of the options available for containing and mitigating it.

World Health Organization, "Pandemic (H1N1) 2009," available at <http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/en/>

This WHO site is the best place to learn about the extent and effects of H1N1 as the outbreak progresses.