

Business Continuity Implications of Human Swine Influenza A/H1N1

Update 27 April 2009

Background

Mexican health officials on 27 April announced that up to 149 people may have died from and 1,614 people may be infected with the A/H1N1 strain of Swine Influenza. Nineteen of Mexico's 32 states are now affected by the outbreak. Also on 27 April, the Spanish Health Ministry announced that a traveller who returned from Mexico on 22 April, has tested positive for Swine Influenza in the south-eastern town of Almance. The announcement followed a declaration by the Canadian authorities on 26 April that four people in Hants County, Nova Scotia Province have contracted the virus. The US on 27 April confirmed a total of 40 cases of A/H1N1 infection in California, Texas, Kansas, New York and Ohio states. The UK authorities announced on the same day that two cases have been confirmed in the town of Airdrie in Scotland. Some of those infected are documented cases of human-to-human infection (the disease is commonly transmitted to humans only by close contact with infected swine). Many of those infected are known to have travelled recently in Mexico. A number of suspected cases are being investigated in several other countries including France, New Zealand, Israel and Australia.

The situation and fundamental points:

- The outbreak continues to cause considerable disruption in the Mexican capital, Mexico City. Schools and public buildings remain closed until further notice and public events have been cancelled in an attempt to limit the spread of the disease.
- International airports, ports and border crossings remain open, and public transport is operating, though travellers are being screened for symptoms of the illness at some transport hubs; increased congestion and delays are likely at these locations. Many businesses in Mexico City have closed or are operating with a skeleton staff. This is likely to be the case until after the 5 May national holiday, though the impact on business may continue for a much longer period.
- The situation in Mexico is currently calm, and we do not anticipate a deterioration in the security environment. Media coverage of the outbreak has caused concern and prompted many to limit their activities. In the event of a scandal regarding the authorities' handling of the situation, localised protests with the potential for unrest are possible, however fears regarding contracting A/H1N1 are likely to limit the impact and duration of any protest activity.
- A/H1N1 is a new strain of Swine Influenza and little is known about its transmission, or its incubation and contagion periods. The true extent of those infected is not known at present. The virus is currently at Phase Three (of six possible alert phases) of the World Health Organization (WHO) Pandemic Alert; the WHO and US Center for Disease Control (CDC) have not issued any travel warnings for swine flu-infected areas.
- Previous outbreaks of this nature have shown that they quickly develop a momentum of their own; the 2006 outbreak of Avian Influenza in humans in 2006 and the 2003 regional outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) had a brief but significant impact on consumption habits, regional travel, logistics and working routines, and highlighted the weaknesses of many corporate business continuity plans designed around 'singular' or localised disasters and incidents.

Travel continuity implications for travellers and expatriate residents:

- Personnel should defer non-essential travel to Mexico until further information on the extent and severity of the illness is available.
- Personnel undertaking travel to Mexico should be aware that in the event that the virus continues to spread, restrictions on movement may be imposed with little or no notice. Significant further deterioration in the situation could lead the authorities in Mexico and other countries to control/prohibit travel to and from affected areas placing restrictions on local and international travel.

- International airports, ports and border crossings are currently operating normally in Mexico, though travellers are being screened for symptoms of the virus in some locations; personnel should allow additional time for journeys, and treat the members of the security forces and medical teams they encounter with patience and respect.
- Travellers should ensure that their medical insurance is up-to-date and that they know how to activate it. They should also check that their medical insurance is valid for travel to Mexico at this time. Personnel should know where to seek medical assistance during their trip.
- Personnel are advised to avoid all live-stock markets, pig farms and other places where you may come into contact with swine. They should also take basic preventative measures such as cleaning hands regularly with soap and hot water or waterless alcohol-based rubs. Personnel should obtain preventative health advice, information on symptoms and regular updates from their health provider, as well as from the additional sources detailed below.
- Travellers with concerns about their health should consult a medical practitioner without delay.

Business and travel continuity implications for management:

- Corporate management should ensure that a corporate travel policy is in place that provides clear guidelines on travel to and deployment within Mexico. The policy should also address transit through the country. Consideration should be given to travellers returning from areas that may subsequently be declared effected or quarantined; the incubation period and contagion periods of A/H1N1 are not yet known.
- In addition to ensuring that personnel seek appropriate medical advice from a professional companies are advised to carefully review their pandemic and business continuity planning with particular attention given to the precautionary measures available to them, and the trigger points at which they will be introduced. Planning of this type will ensure that business decisions are taken consistently across the organization and will help prevent any over-reaction to excessive media reporting. In all cases business should assess in advance the costs associated with these measures and the risks posed if they are not introduced.
- When reviewing continuity planning particular consideration should be given to the impact on operations of localised or widespread restrictions on travel and the movement of goods. Plans should also detail operational methods to be followed in the event of a quarantine, closure or similar incident.
- Corporate management should consider their policy in response to requests from employees or their dependents to leave Mexico and the implications of responding to such requests. Consideration should be given to contractual and reputational implications as well as human resources and insurance.
- Local managers should authorise and control and visits to Mexico, and should ensure that travellers are fully briefed prior to deployment.
- Local managers should ensure that regular briefings and updates are given to employees and dependants addressing the situation, procedures, and morale concerns. Managers should be prepared for anxiety amongst employees and should be prepared to deal flexibly with staff concerns. Briefings should cover the latest information, precautions taken by the company, any relevant restrictions and advice to assist individuals
- Local managers should review working practices in regions affected by the disease. Managers should consider, where possible, relocating meetings to areas not effected by the outbreak or the use of technology (e.g. video conferencing). Companies may wish to consider allowing non-essential staff to work from home.

Further information and support:

- If you need any specific further assistance, please call your dedicated line or email.
- Those seeking medical advice should contact their medical provider. If seeking preventative health advice, information on symptoms and screening, and regular updates go to the UN World Health Organisation (www.who.int), the US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.com) or International SOS (<http://urgent.internationalsos.com>).
- International SOS Pandemic Information Subscribers can access exclusive Swine Flu Planning information by logging in to the International SOS Pandemic Preparedness site at www.internationalsos.com/pandemicpreparedness International SOS Members should refer to the International SOS Medical Online site or contact an International SOS Alarm Centre for advice on routine vaccinations, hygiene measures, personal protective equipment, and the use of antiviral medication.

Please note:

- Check our online services for frequent updates on the situation.

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