

MORAKOT: THE AFTERMATH: Swine flu hindering disaster relief work

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Deity figures covered with mud are pictured in Linbian Township, Pingtung County, yesterday.

PHOTO: CNA

Disaster relief work in the aftermath of Typhoon Morakot is being complicated by the emerging threat of a swine flu epidemic, as an increasing number of flu patients are diagnosed and reported nationwide, including several aid workers.

The Ministry of National Defense said in a press release yesterday that 10 soldiers working in the Pingtung area had been diagnosed with swine flu.

The ministry, however, denied a media report that a soldier had contracted lung disease as a result of a swine flu infection, adding: "All the soldiers infected with the A(H1N1) virus have mild symptoms and are currently being treated in hospital."

The ministry said it had ordered soldiers to execute comprehensive disinfection work in areas hit by the typhoon, as well as victim shelters, to prevent the virus spreading.

About 300 flood victims in Wannei Village (灣內) in Wandan Township (萬丹), Pingtung County, were hospitalized after coming down with a fever, reports said. Though swine flu had been ruled out, the mass hospitalization stirred panic in the village, the report said.

Premier Liu Chao-shiuan (劉朝野) told a press conference yesterday: "While the disaster relief work is going on, we shouldn't be careless about a [possible] A(H1N1) epidemic."

Liu, citing recommendations by the Central Epidemic Command Center's (CECC) committee of experts, said: "In disaster victim shelters, soldiers and volunteers are advised to wear face masks, because they are in contact with many people and that puts them more at risk of infection."

Liu said the government's policy on a possible swine flu epidemic has been to attempt to isolate cases and delay an epidemic for as long as possible, adding that so far the government

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had been successful.

“The global flu situation, however, tells us that we have to act and recent deaths remind us that we have to continue fighting this war,” he said.

Because of this, the CECC has decided to relax procedures for administering Tamiflu to patients, so that the flu medication can be given to anyone demonstrating flu-like symptoms, even if they have tested negative in preliminary tests, Liu said.

“Those with chronic diseases, the elderly, children under five years of age, pregnant women, people in contact with swine flu patients and people with lung disease or other major illnesses will be given priority,” Department of Health Minister Yaung Chih-liang (楊志良) said.

The committee of experts also recommended increasing the country’s stock of vaccine to cover 30 percent of the population, up from 18 percent, which is 7 million doses, Yaung said.

The relaxing of the standards came after the Centers of Disease Control yesterday announced the nation’s latest swine flu deaths.

A six-year-old boy living in Changhua County who had been battling the disease since July 19 and a 44-year-old woman from Pingtung County, who was not a typhoon victim and who began displaying severe flu symptoms on Thursday, passed away yesterday, bringing the nation’s total death toll from the swine flu virus to five.

Meanwhile, residents of Siaolin Village, which was wiped out by landslides during the typhoon, decided to suspend digging at the site.

Tsai Sung-yu (蔡崇裕), chief of the residents’ organization, said the decision was made because it had become much more difficult and dangerous for the soldiers to proceed with the digging after torrential rain on Thursday.

Tsai said the work would restart during reconstruction of the village or during construction of a memorial at the site.

Liu Chien-fang (劉建芳), chief of Jiasian Township (嘉士), said he supported the residents’ decision.

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY FLORA WANG

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