

Ma cool on starting security measures

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The Presidential Office said yesterday that President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) has decided for the moment not to activate the national security mechanism in response to the growing threat of an (A)H1N1, or swine flu, epidemic.

The announcement came after calls from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) for the president to call a national security meeting in response to the growing threat of a nationwide outbreak.

Presidential Office Spokesman Wang Yu-chi (王郁琦) said that Ma had discussed the matter with Premier Liu Chao-shiuan (劉兆玄), who had asked epidemic prevention experts to assess the situation and make recommendations, Wang said.

Wang said it would take no time for Ma to decide whether to call a national security meeting, adding that he did not know how long it would take the Executive Yuan to finish the study and make the recommendation.

The National Security Council would also advise the president on the matter, Wang said.

Calling a national security meeting was a major decision and not many of the nation's presidents have ever done so, Wang said.

"That is why we are very carefully evaluating the possibility," he said.

In related news, the Presidential Office said that National Security Council Secretary-General Su Chi (蘇起) met Department of Health Minister Yaung Chih-liang (楊志良) yesterday to gain a better understanding of the situation.

The Presidential Office also appointed Chang Shan-chwen (張善政), an expert on infectious diseases and the deputy superintendent of the National Taiwan University Hospital, as deputy minister of the Department of Health (DOH).

Cabinet Spokesman Su Jun-pin (蘇俊平) said later yesterday that Liu had not recommended that Ma convene a national security meeting.

Su said Liu reached the conclusion after consultations with epidemic prevention specialists yesterday afternoon, adding that Liu would closely monitor A(H1N1) developments.

Earlier yesterday, the DPP said the national security mechanism should be put into effect immediately to combat the growing number of cases of swine flu, urging the government to boost its stockpile of the anti-flu drug Tamiflu to a level that would be adequate to treat at least 30 percent of the population.

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Speaking at a press conference, DPP Spokesman Cheng Wen-tsang (鄭文堂) said several local experts on infectious diseases, including former minister of health Chen Chien-jen (陳建仁) and former Centers for Disease Control director Su I-jen (蘇伊仁), have repeatedly warned of a possible nationwide outbreak of the virus in the coming months.

“Despite the repeated warnings and rapid increase in the number of confirmed cases, the government has failed to procure enough anti-virals for a minimum of 30 percent of the population,” said Tseng, urging the Control Yuan to investigate whether the DOH was guilty of malfeasance.

According to DPP statistics, Hong Kong has prepared enough flu medication for twice its population, while the US and the EU have stockpiled enough for 30 percent and 50 percent of their citizens respectively.

On Monday, Liu blamed a worldwide shortage of Tamiflu for Taiwan’s relatively small stockpile of the medication.

“News about the (A)H1N1 [strain] has been around for a long time. If other countries had enough time to prepare for it, why not Taiwan?” Cheng asked.

“We call on the premier to stop finding excuses and start actively procuring enough courses of the anti-viral for the people,” Cheng said.

DPP Policy Research Committee chief Ker Chien-ming (柯建銘) said that former president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) held four national security meetings during his term to prevent a bird flu outbreak.

“The infection is expected to reach its peak in October or November. If the Cabinet led by Liu is still around by then, the public will never have confidence in the government’s prevention work,” Ker said.

The KMT caucus also urged Ma to convene a national security meeting.

KMT caucus secretary-general Yang Chiung-ying (楊昌榮) told reporters that the president should show the public the government’s determination to fight influenza by raising the epidemic prevention efforts to the national security level.

FLU PRIMER

Yang said the government should also coordinate different levels of medical institutions and have medical personnel teach students how to protect themselves against the flu when the new school year begins next week.

The KMT caucus also accused the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) of allowing manufacturers of Tamiflu to profiteer as the price of the medicine had risen by 18 percent after the DOH announced on Aug. 15 that the cost of the drug would be covered by the National

Health Insurance.

PRICE INCREASE

At a press conference, KMT caucus deputy secretary-general Lu Hsueh-chang (呂秀蓮) said the price of Tamiflu had risen to NT\$950 per box from NT\$800 since the department's announcement.

This meant that the state coffers would have to spend an additional NT\$750 million to purchase the 5 million boxes of Tamiflu the CDC needs, Lu said, urging the CDC to prevent manufacturers from capitalizing on the flu outbreak.

In response, CDC spokesman Lin Ting (林廷), who was present at the caucus' press conference, said the center was able to procure the drug at a lower price prior to the DOH's announcement because it had purchased the medicine in large quantities and manufacturers did not need to cover the cost of storage or distribution back then.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of National Defense's (MND) Medical Affairs Bureau yesterday confirmed that 41 soldiers had been infected with swine flu, but said that 36 of them had recovered and been released from hospital.

"We still have five soldiers stricken with swine flu in hospital, but only four of them were infected during rescue work in southern Taiwan," said Lieutenant General Fan Bao-lo (范寶路), director-general of the bureau.

"If a sick officer or soldier is discovered in the disaster area, we will remove him immediately," Fan said.

The health minister yesterday confirmed the nation's 44th case of severe swine flu.

Yaung said that the latest statistics showed that there were approximately 38,000 confirmed swine flu patients in the country at press time, but warned that the epidemic has yet to reach its peak.

"We did a good job in delaying the epidemic, which also bought us more time to wait for vaccines," Yaung said.

Quoting the CDC's latest statistics, CDC Director-General Steve Kuo (郭志強) said that there had been 44 severe cases so far, 39 of which had been released from hospitals and five remained in intensive care.

NO. 44

Kuo said that the 44th severe case was a 44-year-old male in Kaohsiung. The patient also has high blood pressure and several chronic illnesses. At press time, he was out of intensive care but still in hospital.

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Meanwhile, the Taipei City Government said yesterday it was prepared to deal with a swine flu epidemic and prevent the flu from affecting the upcoming Deaflympics and the fall school semester.

Approximately 5,000 athletes will attend the 21st Summer Deaflympics in Taipei, which will be held from Sept. 5 to Sept. 15. The city government has mobilized about 36,000 of the city's students to cheer for the Games and provide basic assistance to the athletes.

Despite the threat of a swine flu outbreak, Taipei Mayor Hau Lung-bin (郝龍斌) said the Deaflympics would be held as scheduled, adding that the Taipei City Hospital was fully prepared to provide medical service to athletes who developed symptoms or were infected with the A(H1N1) virus.

Chen Wen-shuo (陳文生), vice chairman of the Deaflympics organizing committee, said students who were infected with the A(H1N1) virus would not be forced to join the Games.

With 16 kindergartens and summer schools in the city forced to close temporarily because of suspected cases of swine flu, Taipei City Education Department chief secretary Lin Hsin-yao (林信耀) said the department would follow the guidelines from the Ministry of Education to prevent cluster infection among students when the school year begins on Tuesday.

The Ministry of Education's closure guidelines state that an entire class should be suspended for five days if two or more suspected cases of swine flu occur in the class within three days.

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY JIMMY CHUANG, MO YAN-CHIH, SHIH HSIU-CHUAN AND CNA

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