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Travel, public gatherings could be banned in bird flu outbreak: Abbott

By BELINDA TASKER and ROBIN PASH

INTERSTATE travel and public gatherings could be banned amid an outbreak of the deadly bird flu virus in Australia.

Health Minister Tony Abbott said the Government was considering the bans as part of plans to tackle the possible spread of bird flu across the country.

"Cancellation of interstate travel, border closures between different parts of the country, cancellation of large public gatherings (are being considered)," he said.

Mr Abbott's comments came as he and counterparts from 30 countries wrapped up a two-day bird flu summit in Ottawa.

They called for a united international effort to prevent a pan-

demic, with the shortage of drugs at the top of the agenda.

But Mr Abbott dismissed plans by India and Taiwan to allow drug-makers to copy the antiviral drug Tamiflu without obtaining a licence from patent-holder Roche Holdings AG.

Australian National University researchers also argue Australia should consider producing mass supplies of antiviral drugs to prepare for a pandemic.

"This idea that we could have as much Tamiflu as we want if only Roche would allow people is just not right," Mr Abbott said.

He also defended Australia's readiness to deal with a pandemic amid fierce criticism by bird flu expert Dr Graeme Laver that the Government's plans to cope with the virus are flawed.

"Australia, if I may say so, has been a bit ahead of the game," Mr Abbott said.

"We've been very quick building up our antiviral stockpile."

Meantime, Australia has lifted its ban on live bird imports from Canada but toughened up rules for the trade.

Australia will also provide \$8 million to Pacific Island nations to help them prepare for a bird flu pandemic.

Prime Minister John Howard said the money would help strengthen quarantine systems, infection prevention and control programs, and animal health surveillance systems.

Australia will next week host a two-day regional summit on how well-prepared Asian nations are for a bird flu pandemic.