



The Canberra Times

Date: Thursday, 27 October 2005
Page Number: 3
Edition: First
Supplement: Main

Market: ACT
Circulation: 42,197
Published: MON TO SAT
Editorial: [email the editor](mailto:reconnect@reconnect.com.au)
Item No: P8063590

Size: 151.14 sq. cm.

APEC hopes to plug gaps in preparation for epidemic

By Danielle Cronin
Health Reporter

Gaps in the region's readiness for a bird flu epidemic would be identified during an unprecedented Asia Pacific Economic Cooperative summit, a senior Department of Foreign Affairs official said yesterday.

Influenza pandemic and disaster management specialists from the Asia-Pacific region would be brought together for the first time to discuss the bird flu threat.

Observers, including representatives, from Cambodia, Burma, Laos, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the World Health Organisation, would also attend the two-day summit in Brisbane starting Monday.

"The meeting will go through the stages of leading to a possible pandemic and what the preparedness and response should be in those various stages," he said.

"So, from outbreak of the bird to human, low-level human to human, pandemic."

Health officials fear bird flu — which has been spreading through Asia and Europe — will cause an influenza pandemic if the bug becomes easily transmissible from person to person, which is now not the case.

The meeting would also focus on

maintaining essential services, such as health, transport, power and other critical infrastructure during a bird flu outbreak.

Closing borders, keeping businesses' doors open and providing medical support to expatriates and the shortage of anti-virals were also likely to be discussed.

Australian National University's public health specialist Dr Buddhima Lokuge and Professor of Law Peter Drahos said yesterday Australia should consider producing mass supplies of generic drugs to prepare for an influenza pandemic.

But Mr Abbott dismissed the ANU specialists' suggestion.

"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 after taking part in a two-day bird flu summit in Canada.

The senior DFAT official said the availability of anti-viral drugs was likely to be an issue during next week's APEC summit.

But there would be no discussion about possible sanctions against countries that failed to adequately prepare for an influenza pandemic.

Yesterday, Prime Minister John Howard pledged \$8 million over four years to help Pacific countries combat the threat posed by bird flu and other infectious diseases.