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GENEVA (Reuters) - The World Health Organization is to examine its handling of the H1N1 pandemic, the group said on Tuesday, after accusations by some politicians that it exaggerated the dangers of the virus under pressure from drug companies.

The United Nations health agency will review the way it dealt with the outbreak of swine flu once the pandemic has subsided, WHO spokeswoman Fadela Chaib told a news briefing.

"Criticism is part of an outbreak cycle. We expect and indeed welcome criticism and the chance to discuss it," she said, adding the WHO's review would involve independent outside experts and its results would be made public.

But she said it was too soon to say when the examination would take place or which experts would be involved.

In the latest complaint about the way authorities have dealt with the pandemic, the Council of Europe, a political forum of most European countries, is to determine whether drug companies influenced public health officials to spend money unnecessarily on stockpiles of H1N1 vaccines. Chaib said the WHO took its work of providing independent advice to its 193 member states seriously, and guarded against the influence of vested interests.

REVIEWING DEMAND

Several countries are cutting back orders for H1N1 vaccines as it becomes clear that the outbreak, declared a global pandemic by the WHO in June, is not as severe as at first feared.

Governments will have an opportunity to question the WHO about H1N1 at a meeting of its 34-member board next week.

The WHO's top flu expert, Keiji Fukuda, will brief the board on January 18 about the latest developments in the first influenza pandemic in more than 40 years.

Developing countries still lack adequate access to both antivirals and vaccines despite donations from industrialized countries and drug makers, the WHO said.

Some 200 million doses of H1N1 vaccine and funding of some \$12 million have been pledged to date, it said in a document prepared for the board.

"Significant progress in international solidarity has been achieved, through donations by developed countries and manufacturers, but overall access to antiviral medicines and vaccines in developing countries remains limited," it said.

GlaxoSmithKline, Novartis and Sanofi-Aventis are among H1N1 vaccine producers.

The WHO last week delivered donated H1N1 vaccine to Mongolia and Azerbaijan, the first of 95 developing and middle-income countries targeted to receive supplies.

It aims to provide these countries with enough vaccine to cover 10 percent of their populations, with health care workers a top priority.

The WHO said last week that southern hemisphere countries struck by H1N1 last year are now broadly protected against new infections, and sickness levels are declining in much of the northern hemisphere, including North America where it first emerged last April.

According to lab-confirmed cases, swine flu has killed at least 12,799 people, but the real toll is much higher and will take several years to establish, the WHO says.

(Additional reporting by [Stephanie Nebehay](#))

