



ATM/CNS SUBGROUP

Agenda Item 7: Other matters

THE UNITED STATES PREPARATIONS FOR PANDEMIC INFLUENZA

(Presented by the United States of America)

SUMMARY

The U.S. Government has undertaken a massive planning effort to stop, slow or limit the spread of a possible pandemic influenza and sustain services that are essential to protecting its citizens and maintaining its economy. The US has developed a National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza and a supporting Implementation Plan, as well as plans for each department and agency within the Federal government. Early implementation of counter measures is essential to slow the spread of the pandemic. Therefore, it is imperative that response plans be developed as soon as possible while there is still time to prepare. Because the aviation systems of the United States and the CAR/SAM region are so closely intertwined, it is critical to have a cooperative multilateral effort to coordinate plans and actions taken by the States' aviation communities in response to a pandemic event.

1. Introduction

1.1 The U.S. Government has undertaken a massive planning effort to stop, slow or limit the spread of a possible influenza virus and sustain services that are essential to protecting its citizens and maintaining its economy. The US has developed a National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza and a supporting Implementation Plan, which articulate an overarching national approach to effectively dealing with this threat. The Strategy and its Implementation Plan provide a broad framework for preparedness, response, and recovery to be used by government at Federal, State, and local levels, as well as by the private sector.

1.2 The U.S. Government participated in an effort by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) to develop pandemic influenza planning guidelines for States, airlines and airports. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), and their partners are also engaged with key States and other multilateral forums, such as the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation organization. Considering the close interdependence of the aviation systems of the United States, Canada, and Mexico, cooperation by these three States on addressing the pandemic influenza threat is critical. In October 2006, the three States developed a trilateral Concept of Operations to enhance situational awareness and operational coordination among the three States on pandemic influenza containment efforts.

2. Background

2.1 In accordance with the National Strategy and its Implementation Plan, all departments and agencies within the Federal government, including the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)), the FAA, and the TSA, have developed detailed plans to sustain essential services. The Federal agencies responsible for taking counter measures are working to develop interagency operational plans to contain the spread of pandemic influenza and support national efforts to limit the loss of life and impact on the nation's economy, infrastructure, and way of life.

2.2 The Secretary of Homeland Security has the principal responsibility for managing the pandemic, and will coordinate Federal operations and resources, establish reporting requirements, and conduct ongoing communications with Federal, State, local, and tribal governments, the private sector, and non-governmental organizations. The Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) will lead U.S. health and medical response efforts and will be the principal Federal spokesperson for public health issues, coordinating closely with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) on public messaging pertaining to the pandemic.

2.3 The DOT's Office of the Secretary of Transportation and the FAA will maintain essential transportation functions and play a critical role in aviation-related containment and response efforts. The FAA is an important player in the Strategy and Implementation Plan because of the focus on the aviation system as a crucial vector for the disease. FAA will work closely with the Department of State, DHS, HHS, international organizations, and host governments to facilitate an international aviation response.

2.4 In addition to developing pandemic response plans at each level in the US Federal Government, the different departments have worked together to establish a national policy on entry/exit screening to impede the spread of the disease. The planning assumptions are based largely on guidance provided by the HHS Centers for Disease Control (CDC):

- The Pandemic could start at any time, at any location.
- Once the virus comes to the U.S., multi-focal outbreaks may be experienced in waves lasting 6-8 weeks at a time in a given location.
- The total pandemic may last from 12 to 18 months or longer.
- Not all regions may be affected simultaneously.
- As much as 40% of the workforce may be absent at the peak of the outbreak.
- Air travel will be reduced by the effects on aviation infrastructure and travel restrictions (either self-imposed or government-imposed).

2.5 The pandemic response plans developed at the national, departmental and agency levels within the Federal Government will be triggered by the recognition of sustained human-to-human transmission of the disease. At that point, we must immediately begin implementation of appropriate counter measures to have any real chance to curtail the spread of the pandemic. Therefore, it is imperative that we develop response plans as soon as possible while we still have time to prepare. While the best strategic thinking should be reflected in preparedness documents, no decisions should be inflexible to the realities that emerge with a given situation. Flexibility to question assumptions and redirect responses as situations on the ground evolve is essential to good decision making.

2.6 The United States Government is committed to sustaining essential aviation services, including operation of the National Airspace System (NAS), continuing safety oversight and providing international coordination and liaison.

2.7 The FAA is urgently concerned about the threat to the air traffic controllers, technicians, and other critical personnel who operate and maintain the NAS. The FAA is conducting a study to assess capacity against projected rates of absenteeism to ensure that any reduction in air traffic service capacity will be, to the extent practicable, mitigated, controlled and predictable. The DOT, DHS, HHS/CDC, the Department of Defense, and other key stakeholders are working to develop and implement measures to respond to pandemic threats to aviation operations, e.g., flights that might be carrying infected passengers.

2.8 The FAA is also concerned about its ability to perform safety oversight to ensure the airworthiness of aircraft; qualifications of pilots, mechanics, and others in safety-related positions; and all operational and maintenance enterprises in domestic civil aviation. A pandemic could have a serious impact on the hundreds of inspectors who regularly perform certification and surveillance of operations, maintenance and manufacturing. The FAA has studied this problem and is prepared to mitigate the impact through a combination of prioritization, remote data accessing, and temporary substitution of regular inspectors.

2.9 The international aviation system is likely to be the primary vector for the spread of any pandemic throughout the world, considering the speed of travel, the global reach of aviation, the volume of traffic, and the close proximity of passengers to one another. Therefore, efforts to curtail the international spread of a pandemic must focus on aviation and must be taken in cooperation with other nations, as no single country can effectively combat the spread of the disease by working alone. During a pandemic, the United States intends to take a risk-based and layered approach to international traveler health screening that may include exit screening at the point of embarkation, en route screening, and entry screening at the point of arrival of all travelers in aviation that wish to enter the United States during a pandemic. The screening of international travelers will utilize a toolbox of measures that, when employed concurrently, may effectively assess the characteristics of an individual traveler that could make him/her a threat to public health in the United States and North America.

3. Recent Activities

3.1 The U.S. national implementation plan was approved on May 3, 2006. We will continue refining departmental and agency plans and taking preparatory steps so that an immediate response can be mounted in the event of a pandemic.

3.2 In October 11-13, 2006, U.S., Canadian and Mexican officials met in Tucson, Arizona and developed a Concept of Operations for a trilateral response to a pandemic influenza outbreak in North America. This was an outcome of the June meeting of the North American Aviation Trilateral in Mexico, where commitments were made to coordinate pandemic response efforts among the three States.

4. Conclusion

4.1 The aviation systems of the United States and CAR/SAM region are so closely intertwined, the FAA will propose a cooperative multilateral effort to coordinate plans and actions taken by the States' aviation communities in response to a pandemic event. This effort could be undertaken by either leveraging existing cooperative efforts or forming a new team to address this challenge.