

Bush seizes on flu threat to press for martial law power

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President Bush Tuesday seized on the threat of a global bird flu pandemic to press yet again for the legislative changes to grant him power to deploy US combat troops in police operations on American soil.

Bush suggested that large numbers of troops could be needed to “effect a quarantine,” essentially sealing off whole cities or regions of the country in the event of an outbreak.

“The policy questions for a president in dealing with an avian flu outbreak are difficult,” Bush said in a rambling answer to a question posed at a White House press conference Tuesday. “One example: If we had an outbreak somewhere in the United States, do we not then quarantine that part of the country? And how do you, then, enforce a quarantine?... And who best to be able to effect a quarantine?”

Answering his own question, Bush declared, “One option is the use of a military that’s able to plan and move. So that’s why I put it on the table. I think it’s an important debate for Congress to have.”

The president’s talk of deploying troops to enforce quarantines has no precedent as a public health measure in the US. Historically, quarantines have been applied against individuals and families diagnosed with an infectious disease, or used in extreme circumstances to prevent the congregation of large groups of people in areas where a disease is spreading.

But sealing off whole regions of the country by military force and preventing anyone from entering or leaving them has more in common with civil war measures than preventive health care.

It is not clear why the military would be needed for such an operation, unless it would be to set up roadblocks and shoot down anyone attempting to escape a region placed under quarantine.

Public health professionals blasted the proposal, warning that the president’s remarks were indicative of the administration’s failure to prepare for the looming flu threat.

Referring to the danger of a flu pandemic, Irwin Redlener, director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at

Columbia University, warned that the US government “is phenomenally not prepared for this.”

Describing Bush’s proposal as “extraordinarily draconian,” Dr. Redlener added, “The translation of this is martial law in the United States.”

Bush’s call for using troops to fight the flu follows his insistence in the wake of Hurricane Katrina that the Pentagon take charge of all major disaster response and relief. The response to the devastation in New Orleans was itself delayed until the US military was able to mass large number of combat-equipped troops—a delay that caused immense suffering and not a few deaths for those trapped in the city.

In the aftermath of the hurricane disaster, Bush and other administration officials have repeatedly urged Congress to repeal or amend the Posse Comitatus Act, an 1878 statute that bars the use the military in domestic policing, except in the case of suppressing an insurrection.

The Bush administration is attempting to take advantage of growing concern over a potential pandemic to advance a political agenda that has nothing to do with the threat to public health.

In a closed-door briefing to Congress last week, Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt said that in the US an avian flu outbreak could kill as many as 2 million, while requiring as many as 10 million hospitalizations.

Over the last eight years, avian influenza has been reported in 11 countries, most of them in Asia. The flu has been spread by migratory birds, with recent reported cases in Siberia.

While killing hundreds of millions of birds, the current H5N1 strain of avian flu has spread to only approximately 100 humans, some 60 of whom died. Until now, most human victims have been infected directly from birds, with little evidence of transmission from humans to humans, the prerequisite for a pandemic.

Nonetheless, scientists have warned for years that the deadly virus could mutate into a form easily transmitted between humans, putting millions of lives at risk, and many

are now expressing near certainty that this will happen. *Science* magazine reported recently that according to expert opinion the odds of a global outbreak are “100 percent.”

In one grim indication of the seriousness with which world governments are taking the threat, the British press revealed recently that officials in the Blair government are making contingency plans for the erection of mass mortuaries that could deal with the bodies of as many as 700,000 people.

In France, meanwhile, the government has bought some 200 million protective facemasks and sufficient quantities of drugs to cover the entire population.

Washington, however, has done relatively little in the way of preparation. US health agencies reportedly have just 2 million doses of Tamiflu, an antiviral drug that has proven effective in combating the H5N1 virus. This is barely enough for 1 percent of the American population. While the US Senate has passed legislation to purchase large quantities of the medicine, the supply is limited. It is produced solely by the global pharmaceutical giant Roche Holding AG of Switzerland, and Washington’s orders have come in after those of a number of countries in Europe and elsewhere.

Ironically, the belated US attempt to secure a greater share of the drug could contribute to the spread of any future pandemic. Health experts have stressed that the best chance for combating it would be to massively treat those in the immediate area of the first human outbreak. WHO stockpiles are very low, however, and the monopolization of drugs by wealthier countries is likely to make that impossible.

While other US funds are being allocated for the production of vaccines, public health experts warn that the development of a vaccine effective in countering the current virus could take years.

The government has delayed for years issuing a comprehensive pandemic influenza plan, leaving open such questions as what role federal agencies would take in purchasing and distributing drug supplies to combat the virus. The delay has left state and local health departments unable to develop their own emergency plans.

The US public health-care system, already stretched to the limit after decades of budget cuts and privatization, is ill-equipped to confront a mass flu outbreak. The much-touted concern with the threat of biological or chemical weapons attacks by terrorists, meanwhile, has been accompanied by sharp cuts to agencies dealing with the spread of disease, such as the Center for Disease Control’s emerging infectious disease program.

Crucial to any response to such a pandemic is what is known as “surge capacity,” the health-care system’s ability to receive a sudden influx of mass casualties. For-profit health care in the US, however, has ruthlessly cut back on excess capacity, slashing the number of available hospital

beds by about a third over the past 25 years.

Successive governments have accelerated these cutbacks, viewing public health as synonymous with “big government” and a convenient area to slash spending in order to pay for tax cuts and militarism.

Some public health experts have warned that the government is seriously underestimating the economic and social impact of a pandemic, which could include wholesale closures of factories and the disruption of transportation, food supplies and other essential functions.

“Avian flu could be the Katrina of medicine,” warned John Bartlett, chief of the infectious-diseases division of Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

As in the Katrina disaster, the Bush administration’s response to the flu threat combines criminal incompetence and negligence with conspiracies against the American people.

The administration is seizing upon every social crisis, both real and potential, to press for the unrestricted power to impose martial law in the United States. Significantly, neither the ostensible political opposition in the Democratic Party nor the mass media has subjected these proposals—including the absurd call for using troops against the flu—to probing criticism.

Within America’s ruling establishment, there is a growing sense that economic and social crises, combined with the unprecedented class polarization between the financial elite and the masses of working people, are creating conditions for social upheavals. The political response is an ever-greater turn toward the methods of police-state dictatorship.



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