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Officials simulate bird flu outbreak Senators push bill to spur vaccination development

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Sen. Pat Roberts

WASHINGTON — An avian flu crisis hits U.S. shores, making 90 million people ill, half needing medical treatment and 10 million requiring hospitalization. Two million are dead.

Such was the scenario considered by top government officials Tuesday in Washington at a three-hour war game sponsored by the National Defense University.

"Other than that, not a severe problem," joked Sen. Pat Roberts, a Kansas Republican, who participated in the event.

The game, called "Global Tempest," required members of Congress and executive branch leaders to react to a flu pandemic that mirrored the 1918 one that killed millions worldwide.

"It doesn't have to happen," Roberts said. "But you look at the (flu) cycles we've been through, what could happen, this is not shouting 'Fire!' in a crowded theater."

The university periodically brings together officials to consider how the government could respond in the event of a national security crisis, including how different levels of government and different government agencies would interact.

"There's no single solution," said Dave Thomas, a National Defense University spokesman. "It's getting people to understand the implications of decisions."

For Roberts, the message was clear: The U.S. needs to get serious about avian flu. So far, there have been 165 reported cases worldwide, with 88 deaths. A pandemic could destroy international economies in addition to taking millions of lives.

The limited number of vaccines available further indicates the world's vulnerability.

Also, intelligence reports indicate that al-Qaida "has knowledge of the companies that are making the vaccine, and they could be a target," said Roberts, who chairs the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Roberts said he hopes increased awareness of the potentially devastating effects of the flu will help increase funding for preparations for a pandemic and help move a bill he has sponsored with Sen. Hillary Clinton, a New York Democrat.

The bill would provide grants to speed vaccine development, provide liability protection for vaccine manufacturers and require the federal government to stockpile antiviral medications that could help fight a pandemic.

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