

Information

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AIRLINE BODY REACTS TO SWINE INFLUENZA OUTBREAK 'Authorities must co-ordinate activities', says AEA

The 34-member Association of European Airlines has given its full backing to initiatives developed within the World Health Organisation and the International Civil Aviation Organisation to address the threat of a swine flu epidemic. The air transport sector is well aware that it has a front-line profile when the spectre of global pandemic raises its head – as demonstrated by the experience of SARS in 2003.

Commenting on the current developments, Ulrich Schulte-Strathaus, Secretary General of AEA said, *"The safety and well-being of the travelling public are always uppermost in our minds. AEA carriers are Europe's leading network carriers and well-prepared to handle health crises. The aviation sector has established guidelines on how best to deal with health risks; they were developed by ICAO, in consultation with WHO"*.

On the important role played by WHO in responding to the current situation, Mr. Schulte-Strathaus said, *"Like other regional airline associations, we support the leadership being shown by WHO in coordinating the global response to the current outbreak. This requires, as it is being done, an ongoing evaluation of the risk of a more serious global pandemic. We note that WHO has to date recommended no restriction of international travel, and no closure of borders. Needless to say, passengers will make informed decisions, provided that there is open and transparent communication of accurate information; they will evidently seek orientation by turning to the website of WHO"*.

Noting that a number of governments have nevertheless introduced various measures including travel warnings, Mr. Schulte-Strathaus said that such measures, whilst well-intentioned, would do more harm than good. In this context, he described as 'irresponsible and ill-advised' a statement by Androulla Vassiliou, the European Commissioner for health issues, in which she advised travellers to avoid, as far as possible, journeys to Mexico and the USA.

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“Even if Commissioner Vassiliou later qualified her statement by making it clear that it was a personal opinion rather than an official Commission pronouncement, that does not undo the impact on public perception. Such rash statements underline the need for a coordinated international response”, commented Mr Schulte-Strathaus.

“Member airlines are informing passengers and staff about the disease, risks, symptoms and precautions. Moreover they are advising their crews about how to identify and manage potential cases they may encounter on-board. The Association and its members are in intensive dialogue with governmental health agencies and airport medical services in a two-way flow of information”, he continued. “A priority now is to establish a co-ordinated international response and avoid a diversity of national rules and requirements”.

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Note to the Editor: The Association of European Airlines (AEA) brings together 34 European established scheduled network carriers. These collectively carry 370 million passengers and 7 million tonnes of cargo each year, operating 2,600 aircraft serving 615 destinations in 165 countries with 11,575 flights a day. They provide around 423,000 jobs directly, and generate a total turnover of €78 billion