

Militarization of Swine Flu Preparations

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The increasing militarization of preparations for an outbreak of swine flu is proceeding rapidly and without very much public debate, despite the relatively mild nature of the disease so far and the fact that many experts believe the panic has been overblown.

Earlier this week, Republican Representative Paul Broun of Georgia warned a town hall meeting that a “socialistic elite” may be preparing to declare martial law in the United States using a pandemic disease as the pretext. “They’re trying to develop an environment where they can take over,” he told attendees according to an article in the Athens Banner-Herald. “We’ve seen that historically.”

In another alarming development this week, National Guard troops are involved in a drill to take over a high school in Maine to deal with potential riots and panic over distribution of treatment for the H1N1 virus, the Maine Sun Journal reported Thursday. “The National Guardsmen will take on the roles of panicked citizens and military police and practice what they would do, such as using tear gas, in the case of a riot,” said the newspaper article entitled “National Guard Drill at High School to Prepare for Possible H1N1 Riot.” The story also noted that local law enforcement would be involved.

This is all despite the fact that the Maine Center for Disease Control has reported just one death tied to the swine flu, and the man actually died from “underlying conditions complicated by H1N1,” according to Dr. Dora Mills, the center’s director.

“This is just a component of moving the stuff from point A to B,” assured the director of Oxford County’s emergency management agency, Scott Parker. He told the Sun Journal that the plan would only be put in place “if needed.”

Apparently concerns about panic and disorder were raised during a conference in April, so the governor and the adjutant General of the Maine National Guard decided to formulate a plan to bring in military police.

But if state military police preparations weren’t bad enough, the federal government now wants to usurp state forces for domestic use under the Pentagon’s command. Though at least the states are fighting back on this issue.

The National Governors Association wrote a letter to the Department of Defense last week criticizing the proposals to take control of their National Guard units for domestic disasters. “Strong potential exists for confusion in mission execution and the dilution of governors’ control over situations with which they are more familiar and better capable of handling than a federal military commander,” the letter stated.

But no matter who retains control of the National Guard troops preparing to deal with swine flu, the federal government's increasingly militarized "emergency preparations" for the virus are developing quickly and mostly under the radar. Just last month CNN and Fox News reported online that the U.S. military was drawing up plans to deal with a spread of the swine flu. "The Pentagon is preparing to make troops available if necessary to help the Federal Emergency Management Agency tackle a potential outbreak of the H1N1 virus," according to a July 29 Fox News article entitled "Military Poised to Help FEMA Battle Swine Flu Outbreak."

And as early as last year, reports also began to surface that federal troops were preparing for "homeland defense" missions and would be operating on American soil — in what would appear to be a violation of the Posse Comitatus Act, which prohibits the use of military forces in domestic law enforcement.

"They may be called upon to help with civil unrest and crowd control," noted the Army Times in a 2008 article entitled "Brigade homeland tours start Oct. 1." The soldiers will also be responsible for things like knowing how to set up road blocks and the use of "nonlethal" weapons normally reserved for war-zones to subdue Americans.

Additionally, the Obama administration has recently resurrected the heavily criticized Bush-era proposal to "update" quarantine regulations, while the U.S. Army advertises jobs for "internment/resettlement specialists" on its website.

The federal government's health authorities operate quarantine centers from Anchorage to Miami, and in 2005 George W. Bush used an executive order to add flu that has the "potential" to create a pandemic to a list of quarantinable diseases. Will the military be used to enforce the quarantines? It is appearing increasingly possible, if it comes to that.

This is all happening at a time when countless experts are warning that fears about the swine-flu virus have been blown out of proportion. In many places the disease even seems to be dissipating. "We'll probably see something that won't be that bad," said Ontario's former chief medical officer, Dr. Richard Schabas. "We would not expect it to be as bad as the flu year was in 2003 with the Fujian strain."

He noted that a pandemic would be expected to kill thousands just in Canada, but so far the swine flu has claimed 66 lives there. "You tell me how overblown that is.... Our preparations always have to be advised not just by the sense of possibilities, but by a sense of probabilities."

England's chief medical officer, Liam Donaldson, recently announced plans to scale back the National Pandemic Flu Service from about 1,600 call-center workers to less than 600 as the number of cases there continues to fall. He warned of the potential for a "second wave," but so far the disease has been less deadly than even the regular seasonal flu.

Australian National University microbiologist Peter Collignon told ABC News the H1N1 virus was no worse than annual influenza strains. "My major concern about what's happening is the fear is out of proportion to what the data shows," he said, adding that the use of the word "pandemic" was creating unnecessary concern.

But here in the United States, the emergency preparations continue to expand along with the power of the federal government. There has already been discussion of forced

vaccinations. And an inspection of so-called “executive orders” issued by past presidents and continuing under Obama reveals that the executive branch already claims sweeping “emergency” powers to deal with health concerns.

Unless Americans start demanding some transparency and accountability, the trend towards bigger and more aggressive government will likely continue. This time the excuse happens to be swine flu, but there will always be some “crisis” not to be “wasted,” as Obama’s chief of staff Rahm Emanuel put it.

The preparations currently under way to deal with swine flu are not only unconstitutional, they are probably more dangerous than the virus itself. It is time for Americans to take personal responsibility for their health and their government and to say enough is enough.

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