



Defense Officials Worry About H1N1 Outbreak This Fall

Defense Department officials, in collaboration with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), are considering a proposal whose stated purpose is to assist civilian authorities in the event of a “significant outbreak” of the H1N1 flu virus this fall; H1N1 is otherwise known as swine flu.

The officials involved have not been named because the proposal, from U.S. Northern Command’s Gen. Victor Renuart, has not yet been approved by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates.



The proposal would be for task forces from all branches of the military to collaborate with FEMA to assist civilian authorities with relief efforts where necessary, in the event of a major swine flu outbreak. Military authorities would oversee operations civilian authorities cannot, such as airlifting patients on a large scale or conducting tests on a large number of viral samples.

Secretary Gates has been asked to sign an “execution order” that would give the go-ahead to the military to begin planning the operation. Orders—if any—to deploy military forces would be reviewed later, depending on whether there are any flu outbreaks and if they are severe enough to pose a public health threat. In other words, the plan will be in motion before its specifics are worked out. We do not know if it would include active-duty troops or whether it would draw exclusively on the National Guard and Reserve forces.

The relationship between the military task forces and the Posse Comitatus Act (which forbids the use of U.S. military troops in civilian operations on U.S. soil) has not been addressed.

It is well known that large populations can be led to cooperate voluntarily with controlling governmental entities by a relentless barrage of publicity surrounding a putative threat to their health. The supposed severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) “epidemic” of 2003 demonstrated this in textbook fashion. The potential threat of SARS was widely publicized in the mainstream media for a number of weeks and caused a great deal of alarm among the public. Then, it literally disappeared from the governmental-mass media radar, leaving those with long attention spans wondering whether the “threat” actually existed.



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