H7N9 bird flu cases set to climb, but no pandemic: WHO

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The number of cases of H7N9 bird flu in China looks set to climb as experts identify previously unexplained infections, but a lack of human-to-human transmission means a pandemic is not on the cards, the World Health Organisation said Wednesday.

"Given the fact that we've seen seven confirmed cases, plus there are reports of other cases, it would not be surprising to see additional cases," said Gregory Hartl, spokesman of the WHO's influenza and epidemics division.

"But these would be additional cases, one by one. We have no evidence so far of human-to-human transmission, and without human-to-human transmission, the likelihood or risk of pandemic is low," he told reporters.

"We're a long way away from thinking about a pandemic," he added.

Earlier Wednesday, Chinese state media said that a man in the eastern province of Zhejiang had died of the H7N9 strain of avian influenza, bringing the total deaths attributed to the virus to three since the strain was confirmed last weekend.

Besides Zhejiang, Chinese health authorities have recorded cases in the eastern provinces of Jiangsu and Anhui, and the commercial hub of Shanghai.

"There's no common factor for all the cases," Hartl noted.

China is considered one of the countries at greater risk from bird flu because it is a top global poultry producer and many chickens in rural areas are kept close to humans.

The more common strain of avian flu, H5N1, has killed more than 360 people globally from 2003 until March 12 this year, according WHO figures.