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Israeli pig farms are located close to Egypt's borders Egyptians fear swine flu may hit them via Israel



Egyptian women look from their home's balcony at a pig farm in the predominantly Coptic Christian district of Old Cairo

CAIRO (Marwa Awad)

Residents in the Sinai Peninsula along Egypt's eastern border with Israel live in fear of a potential outbreak of swine flu from pig farms on Israel's side of the border after the Jewish state last week became the gateway of the virus to the Middle East.

As Egyptian health authorities continued a nationwide slaughter of pigs as a precautionary measure, residents of al Mahdya village, located along Egypt's 250 kilometer (155 miles) border with Israel, braced themselves for the worst as Israel confirmed four cases of human infections.

"We are worried sick about ourselves and families. Our village is a few kilometers from those Israeli pig farms," Sheikh Mahmud Higazi, 53, told Al Arabiya. "How can Egyptian border authorities guard us against air-borne swine flu? These Israeli farms pose a huge threat to Egyptians on the border."

Residents worry that Israel's swine farms, located 10 km (6 miles) away from Egypt's border villages in Sinai, pose a threat to them should desert winds carry viruses across the border.

Despite a law passed in 1963 banning pig farming in kibbutz' across Israel, there are several pig farms in Israel located closer to the border with Egypt. Pigs can, however, be raised for research purposes at the Animal Research Institute.

On Tuesday, Israel confirmed its fourth case of swine flu of a 20-year-old woman from Holon who recently returned from Mexico. The Israeli Health Ministry urged other passengers to "voluntarily quarantine themselves," local press reports said.

All Israel's confirmed cases of the virus, whose official name is H1N1, have been contracted from humans. There are no cases of the flu in Egypt.

Rumors

Dr. Mahmud Abu Zaid, head of the veterinarian institute of northern Sinai, dismissed residents' fears as "no more than rumors," explaining that swine flu is not airborne and can only transmit within one meter or in humid conditions.

"These are understandable but unfounded fears," Abu Zaid told Al Arabiya. "To contract the swine flu virus, two humans have to be within one meter of each other. These farms are at least 10 km away from Egypt's border."

Abu Zaid added that medical surveillance teams along the border between Egypt and Israel have been set up since last week to inspect what crosses over. Pigs are automatically dispatched while birds are checked for bird flu.

Egypt embarked on a mass slaughter of swine following public fear of the spread of swine flu despite WHO and other health groups saying there was no evidence the animals were transmitting swine flu to humans.