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Mexico Declares Emergency Following Outbreak Of Swine Flu

by LADB Staff

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Already burdened by a global economic crisis and an explosion of drug-related violence, Mexico is having to face a third calamity, an outbreak of a deadly strain of swine flu that has thus far caused more than 150 deaths and inflicted more damage on the country's already fragile psyche. The outbreak of the flu, known as H1N1, has not been confined to Mexico, with mild cases reported as far as Spain, Scotland, New Zealand, Germany, and Brazil. But Mexico is considered the center of the outbreak, with more than 1,600 cases reported as of the end of April, compared with fewer than 100 in other countries. Still, there is strong concern outside Mexico's borders, with the World Health Organization (WHO) warning that the disease could spread quickly.

The outbreak caused the Secretaria de Salud (SSA) to declare a state of alert for the entire country on April 25, after almost 2,000 people had been hospitalized with flu-related symptoms, including serious cases of pneumonia. Most of the early cases were concentrated in central and southern Mexico, including Mexico City, but the SSA eventually extended the alert to the entire country. Mexico City and five states had already been placed in a state of emergency two days earlier on April 23. To reduce widespread exposure to the disease for the Mexican population, the government took steps to discourage large public gatherings, including ordering the closure of all primary and secondary schools and universities until at least May 6. Public events were cancelled or restricted in many cities, including Sunday masses and other church services.

On April 26, two professional soccer games in Mexico City were played with no fans in the stands. "We are at the most critical moment of the epidemic. The number of cases will keep rising so we have to reinforce preventive measures," Health Secretary Jose Angel Cordova said at a news conference. There are some suggestions that many infections might have occurred during Easter Week, a traditional vacation period in Mexico, when people frequently gathered in large crowds. Mexican and international health authorities are taking extreme precautions because there is no vaccination for H1N1, which has some elements of flu strains found in pigs, birds, and humans. The hybrid is considered a new virus, which means that scientists and health experts do not know for sure how it will behave. "The only thing that we know is that we have a virus that is transmitting between people, and it is causing some concern, and it has some characteristics derived from swine viruses, avian viruses, and human viruses. And that's all we know for sure," animal health expert Peter Roeder, a consultant to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), told ABC News.

World Bank provides emergency loan

To help Mexico deal with the crisis, the World Bank has agreed to provide an emergency loan of US\$205 million. Finance Secretary Agustin Carstens said US\$25 million would be made available immediately so the government can acquire medications and medical equipment to detect the virus. While Mexico is considered the center of the flu outbreak, the virus spread outside the country's

borders through foreign visitors who traveled to Mexico in recent weeks. This prompted the WHO to raise the global alert level to Phase 4 and then to Phase 5. The designation of Phase 4 or Phase 5 signals that a disease is becoming increasingly adept at spreading among humans.

WHO officials said the situation is worrisome, but they are not ready to bump the designation to Phase 6, used for a full-scale pandemic. In Mexico, the emergence of the swine flu comes as the country is already wrestling with huge national problems, including the impact of the global economic slowdown on the Mexican economy (SourceMex, October 01, 2008 and January 14, 2009) and the rapidly escalating drug-related violence (SourceMex, January 14, 2009 and March 11, 2009). Just days after the alerts were declared, an earthquake measuring 5.7 on the Richter scale rocked central and western Mexico. The temblor caused minimal damage in Mexico City, other than jar the already damaged nerves of the capital's residents, many of whom still remember the devastating earthquake that leveled many parts of the city in 1985 (SourceMex, September 21, 2005).

The earthquake caused two deaths in Guerrero state. But Mexicans are fond of writing ballads about difficult times, and the swine-flu outbreak was not an exception. "While there was palpable fear among many residents, one Mexican custom was alive and well: Laughing at the possibility of death," said The Wall Street Journal. The following lyrics were part of a ballad circulating on the Internet. "Now who's going to help us?/ Call in Superman/ We'll all be dead by the time Indiana Jones gets here." Speculation abounds regarding source of infection. Speculation has been rampant about the source of the H1N1 virus in Mexico, although authorities have yet to determine with certainty when or where the outbreak began. The government initially said the first victim was a 39-year-old woman in Oaxaca state, who died on April 13 from a severe case of pneumonia.

It took 10 days to confirm the presence of the H1N1 virus because Mexico lacks sophisticated laboratories that can perform tests to identify unknown strains of the virus. The SSA subsequently discovered an earlier case in the rural community of La Gloria in the municipality of La Perota in Veracruz state, where tests show that 5-year-old Edgar Hernandez contracted the disease sometime at the end of March. Residents of La Gloria, about 8.5 km south of a huge hog operation, have been complaining of unusually strong flu symptoms since February. By the end of March, at least 500 about one-sixth of the town's population of 3,000 were diagnosed with severe respiratory infections. Later data suggests that as many as 800 of the town residents showed flu symptoms.

Many residents and local officials are drawing a link between the high rate of flu cases and what they say are unsanitary operations at Granjas Carroll de Mexico, which is partially owned by US-based Smithfield Foods Inc. They accuse Granjas Carroll of failing to properly treat waste from hogs. In an interview with the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada, La Gloria official Bertha Crisostomo, citing recent studies from the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social (IMSS) and Veracruz health agencies, said Granjas Carroll allows untreated waste to sit in the open, attracting clouds of flies. The insects then spread disease to the town's population.

La Gloria residents have asked Veracruz state to urge federal authorities to conduct a thorough inspection of Granjas Carroll. Because of the high number of flu cases in the community, the SSA has established a quarantined area around La Gloria. Still, local health officials and Health Secretary Cordova cautioned against drawing quick conclusions. They noted that only the sample taken from

Edgar Hernandez came back positive with H1N1, out of 30 samples taken at the local hospital. Cordova said the rest of the community was suffering from H2N3, a common strain of flu. Other private health experts agreed. Even with the large number of local residents complaining of flu-related symptoms, they reiterated that only one case of H1N1 has been discovered thus far among that population. "The most likely way that this young boy got the infection was from another person who had been in contact with the pigs," Dr. Kathryn Edwards of Vanderbilt Medical Center told ABC News.

Hog specialists for Mexico's largest veterinary organization, the Asociacion Nacional de Medicos Veterinarios, said there is no proof that hogs transmitted the virus to humans. "This disease is transmitted from human to human, not from hog to human," said Laura Batista, a spokesperson for the organization. The country's national hog-producers organization (Organizacion Nacional de Porcicultura y Porcicultores) also disputed the theories that hogs might have infected humans. Granjas Carroll, which owns farms in Veracruz and Puebla states, issued its own news release reiterating the statements by the hog-producers organization. The company denied that it was responsible for the outbreak of H1N1 in Mexico. As evidence, it noted that none of its workers or any of its 500,000 hogs has shown any evidence of being infected with swine flu.

Still, some experts say that it is feasible that hogs can transmit a virus. During the avian-flu scare a few years ago, some epidemiologists were raising the possibility that hogs could be carriers of deadly strains of flu viruses (NotiCen, November 13, 2005). FAO consultant Roeder speculated on one remote possibility. In an interview with the Associated Press, he said one of the workers who was tending the hogs could have passed a human influenza virus to a pig already infected with another type of swine flu, and then that pig could have also come into contact with a bird virus.

The resulting H1N1 virus could then have been transmitted back to the workers. Hog industry worried that pork consumption will fall In addition to attempting to deny any responsibility for the infection, Granjas Carroll also made a strong pitch to refute the notion that consuming meat from an infected animal could result in transmission of the virus. "We insist that this virus has been transmitted from human to human," said Granjas Carroll. "There is no risk whatsoever of infection from simply consuming pork." Concern was evident among Mexican consumers, with pork sales falling by 80% and prices dropping by about 3.00 pesos (US\$0.21) per kg following publicity of the swine-flu outbreak. Officials for the Organizacion Nacional de Porcicultores (ORNAPOR) said economic losses from a drop in demand in Mexico City alone could amount to between 1 million and 2 million pesos (US\$72,000 to US\$145,000) per day.

The Mexican hog and pork industry is not only concerned about a drop in domestic consumption but also about potential damage to its export markets. In the aftermath of the outbreak, several countries including Russia, China, the Philippines, Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador temporarily halted all imports of Mexican pork. "The swine-flu outbreak could hurt the efforts of the Mexican pork industry to enter the lucrative Chinese market," said Alejandro Ramirez, an official with the Confederacion Nacional de Porcicultores Mexicanos. Ramirez said the loss of potential sales to China would be a big blow to the industry because Mexican pork producers worked hard to eradicate the country of swine fever to enter that market.

Officials, analysts worried about impact on economy

Beyond the negative impact on the hog industry, Finance Secretary Carstens said there is a "high probability" that the flu outbreak could severely damage the Mexican economy in general if disruptions to the retail sector and tourism occur for an extended period. Concerns were evident on the Bolsa Mexicana de Valores (BMV), where shares for retailers like Wal-Mart de Mexico and companies that rely on tourism like Grupo Aeroportuario del Pacifico and Grupo Aeroportuario del Centro Norte fell sharply in the aftermath of the government's decision to declare an emergency. "The recommendation to stay home, at least during the last three days, has an effect on [store] traffic," analyst Marisol Huerta of Actinver brokerage told Reuters. Similarly, the Asociacion Mexicana de Hoteles de la Ciudad de Mexico (AMHMCDM) reported a 20% decline in the number of visitors to Mexico City on the weekend after the emergency was declared.

Concern about a sharp drop in the number of foreign visitors is especially worrisome for the Mexican tourism industry, which is already reeling from negative publicity that followed an explosion in drug-related violence in recent months. Mexico relies heavily on business and leisure trips, both of which could be curtailed sharply if the swine-flu emergency continues for an extended period.

The biggest concern for the Mexican business sector is if the WHO declares a Phase 6 emergency. "If this becomes a real pandemic, things will get complicated," said Alberto Bernal, director of fixed-income research at Bulltick Securities Corp. Economist Rodrigo Centeno of the Centro de Investigacion y Docencia Economica (CIDE) in Mexico City agreed. "Right now the effect is on the demand side," Centeno said. "Closing workplaces could affect supply." For now, Mexican businesses are operating as best they can. The Consejo Coordinador Empresarial (CCE) said many companies especially those based in Mexico City and other areas with the highest rates of flu cases are continuing bare-bones operations, even though a large number of their employees are staying home.

The CCE has endorsed recommendations from the Secretaria del Trabajo y Prevision Social (STPS) asking companies to adopt flexible schedules to allow employees to continue working, even if they have to perform tasks at home. "In an effort to protect the health of our workers but also maintain our productivity and ease the negative impacts [of the flu outbreak] on our national economy, we support the STPS recommendations," said CCE president Armando Paredes. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on April 29, 2009, reported at 13.71 pesos per US\$1.00]

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